

interzone

JULY 2001

NUMBER 169

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'Isabel of the Fall'

A NEW STORY BY

Ian R. MacLeod

PLUS STORIES BY

GWYNETH JONES

STEPHEN BAXTER

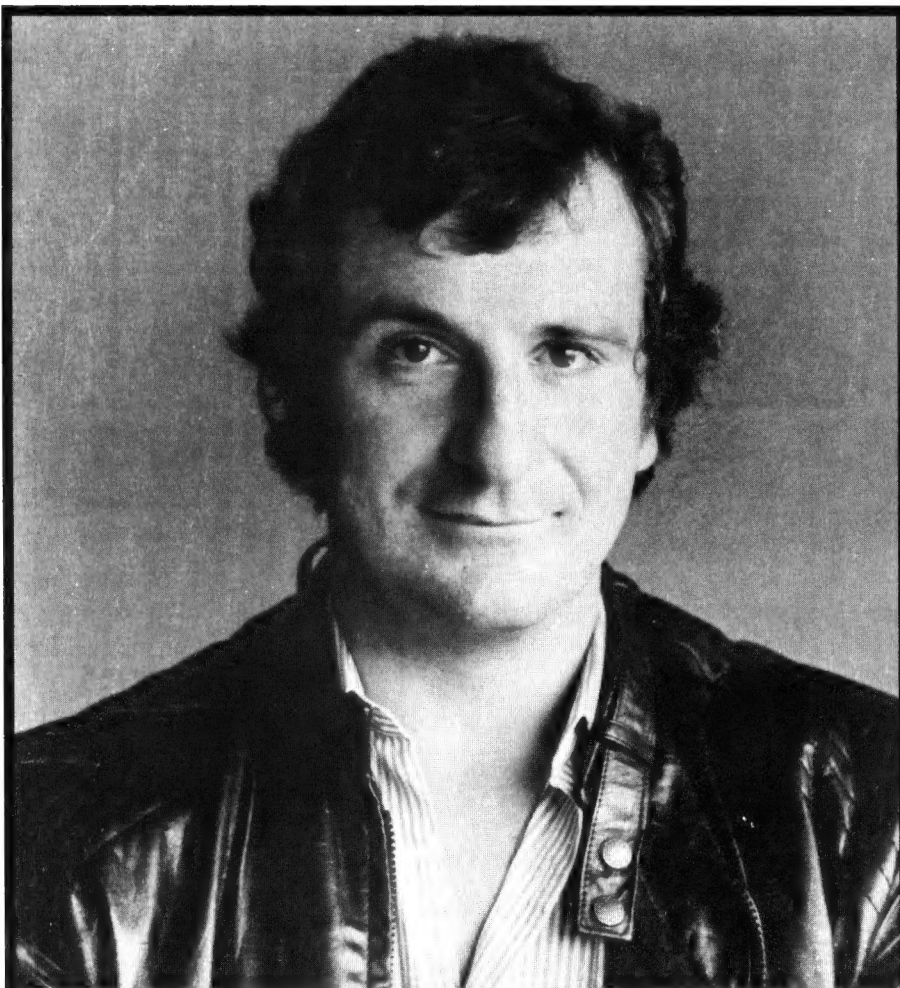
MATT COLBORN

NEAL ASHER

MAT COWARD

NICK LOWE • DAVID LANGFORD • IAN R. MacLEOD interview





Douglas Adams (1952-2001)

Whenever I redecorate, I get out my tapes of *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and pay them loudly while I get on with the drudgery of putting up wallpaper. The greatest tribute to the comic genius of Douglas Adams that I can think of is that none of the wallpaper in my home hangs straight; tears of laughter do that to paper-hanging. I never met the man, but I suspect I'm not alone in thinking of him as a personal friend. I last heard him on Radio 4 celebrating the comic genius of the late Peter Jones, who played "The Book" in the original radio serial. How could any of us believe that he would be next? There is not enough laughter in the world, but Douglas Adams did his best to change that. I think it's time we redecorated again...

Paul Brazier

For John Clute

on the publication of
Appleseed

Earliest risers are first
to retire.

Your novel — at sixty! —
gives much to admire:

The landscapes, the
language, the toys
and balloons,
And all seventeen of
Hedonia's moons!

The bloom farthest down
on the iris's lance
Will be last to unfurl but
may still lead the
dance.

— Tom Disch



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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

JULY 2001

Number 169

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Dear Editors:

As a result of a somewhat hectic life over the last few months, I haven't been reading very much. However I just read the January *Interzone* (issue 163), which I thought was very good. I particularly enjoyed Eric Brown's masterful "The Children of Winter."

Chris Butler

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The Millennium Bug

Dear Editors:

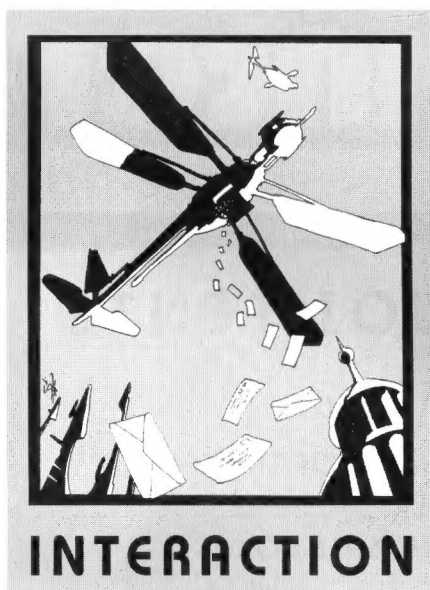
It isn't clear whether Paul Brazier's comments on the "amazing scam of the millennium bug" ("Counting the Years, Counting the Hours," *IZ* 165) were a Westfahl-style fishing trip. Whether or not they are, I feel I must respond to the post-millennial myth which has quietly become popular opinion despite the facts. It is easy to feel a disappointment that the world carried on as usual after the intense media interest of 1999, but by the time the Millennium Bug had entered the popular imagination it was already largely defeated.

I first came across the issue in the pages of *Interzone* – Charles Stross's wonderful "Ship of Fools" in issue 98. That was August 1995, back when the problem was better known as "the roll-over" and shortly before I started working in IT. From my worm's-eye view of the field in the late 1990s, it quickly became apparent that the real problem was that Y2K was a deadline that wasn't going to slip. Such a hard fact in a business not famous for its ability to complete on time was always going to result in hard work. However, the costs incurred were largely money that was always going to be spent. Instead of a steady expense stream over a long period we got a much higher peak much sooner – and now we are experiencing the drop on the other side. (And don't believe the tale that countries like Italy only spent 50 million and got away with it. I worked for a multinational company which was fixing their own systems in every country they operated in; the money came out of central funding so the ledger showed a charge against head office.) It is easy to say that the problem could have been avoided, but its creation has more to do with human nature than artificial stupidity. As a result, Y2K was the work of years.

With my long training in disaster, from John Wyndham to *Independence Day*, I was expecting – almost hoping for – at least a minor apocalypse. I'm sure other sf fans felt the same; Stross's story manages to cover the angles exceptionally well. Instead we got fireworks on the Thames and on the TV. Is that so bad?

Duncan Lawrie

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Richard Calder

Dear Editors:

I have been reading *Interzone* with great interest for the last couple of years (alongside American magazines like *Asimov's* or *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*) and would like to congratulate you on the overall quality of your magazine. I do not feel entitled to vote on last year's stories, because I have not read them all and it would be unfair (I will only say that I liked a great deal Peter Hamilton's cover story). However, I would like to comment on the publication of so many novellas by Richard Calder, always as cover stories. I personally do like the "Lord Soho" series (which in reality should be called the "Richard Pike" series, beginning with the novel *Malig-nos*, the best of them all) but I find it excessive that such a high proportion of your magazine is devoted to one single writer. Calder's sf grotesque extravaganza is simply not representative enough of the genre to warrant such attention. What about publishing more of other writers I have been missing? For example, British writers like Ian R. MacLeod – why is it that one needs to look for their stories in *Asimov's*? My point is, do offer some Calder once or at most twice a year, yes, especially now that his writing has become readable, but please cast your net a bit wider! You also tend to repeat other writers (all magazines do) but this case is *sui generis*.

Joan Montserrat

London N4

Dear Editors:

I come down very much in the "pro-" Richard Calder camp. Loved both the latest and the previous Pike stories. Marvellous, strange, dark stuff. I guess if it isn't your cup of tea it might have

seemed like a lot of material, but that's not something I would complain about.

Sarah Singleton

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Dear Editors:

The past year has seen *IZ* run two sequences of stories by a single author, the "Lord Soho" series by Richard Calder and the "Impossible Encounters" series by Zoran Zivkovic. Whilst I did not rate any single story by Zoran Zivkovic among my favourites in the year, I did enjoy and look forward to each one that continued the sequence, whereas those by Richard Calder actually became irritating. To my mind the problem with the "Lord Soho" sequence is more to do with the amount of space taken up by each story and the prominence of the sequence (each one being represented on the magazine cover) than the stories themselves. It appears that when your writers are given the opportunity to run a sequence of series they have a tendency to try and dump a whole novel into your pages. Kim Newman & Eugene Byrne and Brian Stableford acted similarly.

As a general principle running a sequence of stories is a pretty good thing provided it remains the exception rather than the norm, but I think you need to be very careful about what you select and be rigorous in ensuring that those contributing a sequence keep strictly within the short-story format. This should then allow the readers that are enjoying the series to do so without it overshadowing the magazine for those who do not.

Dave Smith

david-k-smith@lineone.net

Dear Editors:

I particularly liked all the Richard Calder stories from last year, with no firm favourite. Ever since "Toxine" in the *Interzone: The 4th Anthology* (1989) I have wanted to read more of Calder's writing. I currently have a newsagent's order for *IZ* which will continue as long as Calder's stories at the very least. A critical profile of the author and his work would also be appreciated. Calder's stories have also ensured excellent covers by Dominic Harman.

Steve Tollyfield

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Top-Shelf Material?

Dear Editors:

I would like to add my support to the views of Mark Norman in issue 167 in relation to the cover of *IZ* 166. While I did not find the cover "offensive" as implied by the editorial reply, I do agree that covers which show scantily-clad women do not help the image of

science fiction.

I'm currently taking an MA in Science Fiction Studies at Liverpool University, and as such I have become "public" about my interest in sf, whereas before I had the luxury of choosing who I told about it. As such, I've spent a lot of time explaining that:

- a) sf is not just about *Star Trek*
- b) sf is a serious subject worthy of serious study
- c) while sf has had more than its fair share of bad fiction and bad artwork, it has also had more than its fair share of very good fiction and excellent artwork – much of it in magazines.

Usually I can point to *Interzone* for current examples of both good fiction and good artwork. But there are exceptions, and the cover for issue 166 was one of them. While I am sure the picture is "artistic," I did not consider it to be either tasteful or necessary. If you truly feel that this cover was "sedate" then could you please explain why, when you do this, it is always scantily-clad women, and never scantily-clad men? I'm not in favour of either, but it could be seen as a statement that you are aiming the magazine at a male market rather than a general one. Historically sf, as many things in life, has been a male domain. That is no longer the case, and adjustment is needed on all sides. Please bear that in mind for future covers.

Despite that, I still firmly believe that *IZ* is a wonderful magazine, full of good fiction and features. Keep up the (mostly) good work!

Catherine Pacey
Liverpool

Dear Editors:

I was disappointed when you seem to react to previous criticism of "lightly-clad women" on your covers by an unmerited act of self-censorship, all male or female figures being fully clothed on the subsequent covers, even where the associated story warranted a more mature attitude.

That is under the cover of *IZ* 166, which justifiably evokes the temptress in the title story. I take exception to Mark Norman in *IZ* 167 equating this to top-shelf material, and his patronizing attitude, which assumes he speaks for the majority of your readers. I cannot believe that the image of *Interzone* or science fiction is under threat from such innocuous pictures – but censorship would surely be a nail in the coffin.

Ironically, the issue in which Mr Norman's letter appears has what he would probably consider an even more explicit image on the cover, despite the woman in question being fully clothed. I hope that this was deliberate on your part.

If *IZ* is a democratic forum I want to register my vote: I have no objection to naked/semi-naked/fully clothed men/

women/alien etc on or inside the covers of the magazine. Given a strong story, I think the cover artist should have license to illustrate it how they see fit, without fear of censorship, self-imposed or otherwise.

Adrian Stanley
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Dear Editors:

Following Mark Norman's letter in no. 167 criticizing the "top-shelf-type" covers, this controversy has been around a long time. A 1951 issue of *Amazing Stories* devoted most of its very generous allocation of correspondence pages to the subject, a large majority of readers deploring the *Amazing* type of cover (typically, a barely-clothed woman being menaced by a Bug-Eyed Monster, with a heavily-spacesuited Earthman coming to the rescue, raygun in hand – all variations on St George and the Dragon, come to think of it) and comparing it unfavourably with the spaceship/robot/alien landscape type covers of *Astounding*. Most of these objectors seemed to be mainly concerned with the effect on their reputations should their mothers or workmates find them reading magazines with offensive covers. (Not that I find them offensive, just inappropriate.) As I recollect, *Amazing* took no more notice than you are likely to.

Kathryn Bell
London E7

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Evelyn Lewes

Dear Editors:

I have learned to put up with Gary Westfahl's articles: I have come to terms with Richard Calder's interminable stories – somebody, somewhere finds these things interesting or provocative or something. But in the matter of Evelyn Lewes's piece "Calling all Angels" in *IZ* 165 I find myself entirely with Disgusted Fan of Tunbridge Wells, aka Ben Jeapes. Coincidentally I had just finished her article when *IZ* 167 turned up. Coincidentally I am a fan of *Farscape*. I would not have written, however, had not Ms Lewes intimated that there would be "later columns" in a similar vein.

Ms Lewes's "commentary" was too long, too uninformed and too lacklustre for a repeat to be an attractive proposition. There may be media publications where a "well-meant attempt at an overview" is appropriate, but in my opinion *Interzone* is not the place. *IZ*'s readership is composed of hardcore sf fans. Reviews in it are always excellent (although one does still feel that occasionally a Post-It beside the computer screen reminding the writer "don't wander off" would be apposite).

To commit four pages to the kind of article that can state: "what is happening is that TV entertainment has discovered it has to feature women in its product" – and to write it, apparently, completely off the top of one's head, places the piece outside the parameters of excellence one usually associates with *Interzone*.

No more, I beg of you.

Judi Moore
Milton Keynes, Bucks.

Dear Editors:

Evelyn Lewes seems to think that a TV programme is good just because it has had large amount of money spent on it. Never mind that the plot is weak, the characters lame and the script is drivel, none of this matters as long as it looks good. The term to use I think is "candy-floss for the eyes"; any serious reviewer should look beyond that, especially in a magazine like yours. I can get the other sort of review from any tabloid paper or magazine.

Ian Sewell
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Dear Editors:

I was about to write in support of Paul Beardsley's appeal for more discussion of fiction in "Interaction" (although already I can see a flaw in that course of action) when I was side-tracked by the Jeapes/Lewes exchange. Ben Jeapes made some interesting points, so it's a shame he derailed serious debate with his "pretty little head"

Readers' Letters continue on page 54

Isabel *of the* Fall

Ian R. MacLeod

Once, in the time which was always long ago, there lived a girl. She was called Isabel and – in some versions of this tale, you will hear of the beauty of her eyes, the sigh of her hair, the falling of her gaze which was like the dark glitter of a thousand wells, but Isabel wasn't like that. In other tellings, you will learn that her mouth stuck out like a seapug's, that she had a voice like the dawn-shriek of a geelie. But that wasn't Isabel, either. Isabel was plain. Her hair was brown, and so, probably, were her eyes, although that fact remains forever unrecorded. She was of medium height for the women who then lived. She walked without stoop or any obvious deformity, and she was of less than average wisdom. Isabel was un-beautiful and unintelligent, but she was also un-stupid and un-ugly. Amid all the many faces of the races and species which populate these many universes, hers was one of the last you would ever notice.

Isabel was born and died in Ghezirah, the great City of Islands which lies at the meeting of all the Ten Thousand and One Worlds. Ghezirah was different then, and in the time which was always long ago, it is often said that the animals routinely conversed, gods walked the night and fountains filled with ghosts. But, for Isabel, this was the time of the end of the War of the Lilies.

Her origins are obscure. She may have been a child of one of the beggars who, then as now, seek alms amid the great crystal concourses. She may have been daughter of one of the priestess soldiers who fought for their Church. She may even have been the lost daughter of some great matriarch, as is often the way in these tales. All that is certain is that, when Isabel was born in Ghezirah, the many uneasy alliances which always bind the Churches had boiled into war. There were also more men then, and many of them

were warriors, so it is it even possible that Isabel was born as a result of rape rather than conscious decision. Isabel never knew. All that she ever remembered, in the earliest of the fragmentary records which are attributed to her, is the swarming of a vast crowd, things broken underfoot, and the swoop and blast overhead of what might have been some kind of military aircraft. In this atmosphere of panic and danger, she was one moment holding onto a hand. Next, the sky seemed to ignite, and the hand slipped from hers.

Many people died or went mad in the War of the Lilies. Ghezirah itself was badly damaged, although the city measures things by its own times and priorities, and soon set about the process of healing its many islands which lace to form the glittering web which circles the star called Sabil. Life, just as it always must, went on, and light still flashed from minaret to minaret each morning with the cries of the Dawn-Singers, even if many of the beauties of which they sang now lay ruined beneath. The Churches, too, had to heal themselves, and seek new acolytes after many deaths and betrayals. Here, tottering amid the smoking rubble, too young to fend for herself, was plain Isabel. It must have been one of the rare times in her life that she was noticed, that day when she was taken away with many others to join the depleted ranks of the Dawn Church.

The Dawn Church has its own island in Ghezirah, called Jitera, and Isabel may have been trained there in the simpler crafts of bringing light and darkness, although it is more likely that she would have attended a small local academy, and been set to the crude manual tasks of rebuilding one of the many minarets which had been destroyed, perhaps hauling a wheelbarrow or wielding a trowel. Still, amid the destruction that the War of the Lilies had visited on Ghezirah, every Church knew that to destroy the

minarets which bore dawn across the skies would have been an act beyond folly. Thus, of all the Churches, that of the Dawn had probably suffered least, and could afford to be generous. Perhaps that was the reason that Isabel, for all her simple looks and lack of gifts, was apprenticed to become a Dawn-Singer as she grew towards womanhood. Or perhaps, as is still sometimes the way, she rose to such heights because no one had thought to notice her.

Always, first and foremost in the Dawn Church, there is the cleaning of mirrors: the great reflectors which gather Sabil's light far above Ghezirah's sheltering skies, and those below; the silver dishes of the great minarets which dwarf all but the highest mountains; the many, many lesser ones which bear light across the entire city each morning with the cries of the Dawn-Singers. But there is much else which the apprentices of the Dawn Church must study. There is the behaviour of the light itself, and the effects of lenses; also the many ways in which Sabil's light must be filtered before it can safely reach flesh and eyes, either alien or human. Then there are the mechanisms which govern the turning of all these mirrors, and the hidden engines which drive them. And there is the study of Sabil herself, who waxes and wanes even though her glare seems unchanging. Ghezirah, even at the recent end of the War of Lilies, was a place of endless summer and tropic warmth, where the flowers never wilted, the trees kept their leaves for a lifetime, and the exact time when day and night would flood over the city with the cries of the Dawn-Bringers was decreed in the chapels of the Dawn Church by the spinning of an atomic clock. But, in the work of the young apprentices who tended the minarets, first and always, there was the cleaning of the mirrors.

Isabel's lot was a hard one, but not unpleasant. Although she had already risen far in her Church, there were still many others like her. Each evening, after prayers and night-breakfast, and the study of the photon or the prism, Isabel and her fellow apprentices scattered to ascend the spiral stairs of their designated local minaret. Some would oil the many pistons and flywheels within, or perhaps tend to the needs of the Dawn-Singer herself, but most clambered on until they met the windy space where what probably seemed like the whole of Ghezirah lay spread glittering beneath them, curving upwards into the night. There, all through the dark hours until the giant reflectors far above them inched again towards Sabil, Isabel pulled doeskin pouches over her hands and feet, unfolded rags, wrung out sponges, unwound ropes and harnesses, and saw with all the other apprentices to polishing the mirrors. Isabel must have done well, or at least not badly. Some of her friends fell from her minaret, leaving stripes of blood across the sharp edge of the lower planes which she herself had to clean. Others were banished back to their begging bowls. But, for the few remaining, the path ahead was to become a Dawn-Singer.

To this day, the ceremonies of induction of this and every other Church remain mostly secret. But now, if she hadn't done so before, Isabel would have travelled by tunnel or shuttle to the Dawn Church's island of Jerita, and touched the small heat of the clock which bore the unchanging day

and night of eternal summer to all Ghezirah. There would have been songs of praise and sadness as she was presented to the senior acolytes of her Church. Then, after they had heard the whisper of deeper secrets, Isabel's fellow apprentices were all ritually blinded. Whatever the Eye of Sabil is, it must filter much of the star's power until just enough rays of a certain type remain to destroy vision, yet leave the eyes seemingly undamaged. The apprentices of the Dawn Church all actively seek this moment as a glimpse into the gaze of the Almighty, and it is hard to imagine how Isabel managed to avoid it. Perhaps she simply closed her eyes. More likely, she was forgotten in the crowd.

Thus Isabel, whose eyes were of a colour that remains forever unrecorded, became a Dawn-Singer, although she was not blind, and – somehow – she was able to survive this new phase of her life undetected. She probably never imagined that she was unique. Being Isabel, and not entirely stupid, but certainly not bright, she probably gave the matter little deep thought. In this new world of the blind, where touch and taste and sound and mouse-like scurrings of new apprentices were all that mattered, Isabel, with all her limited gifts, soon discovered the trick of learning how not to see.

She was given tutelage of a minaret on the island of Nashir, where the Floating Ocean hangs as a blue jewel up on the rising horizon. Nashir is a beautiful island, and a great seat of learning, but it was and is essentially a backwater. Isabel's minaret was small, too, bringing day and night to a cedar valley of considerable beauty but no particular significance save the fact that to the west it overlooked the rosestone outer walls of the Cathedral of the Word. Before dawn as she lay in her high room, Isabel would hear laughter and the rumble of footsteps as her mirror-polishing apprentices finished their duties, and would allow a few more privileged ones to pretend to imagine they had woken her with their entrance, and then help her with her ablutions and prayers. Always, she gazed through them. Almost always now, she saw literally nothing. She thought of these girls as sounds, names, scents, differing footsteps and touches. Borne up with their help onto her platform where, even atop this small minaret, the sense of air and space swam all around her, Isabel was strapped to her crucifix in solemn darkness, and heard the drip-tick of the modem which received the beat of Jerita's atomic clock, and sensed the clean, clear waiting of the freshly-polished mirrors around and above her as, with final whispers and blessings, the apprentices departed to their quarters down by the river, where, lulled by birdsong, they would sleep through most of the daylight their mistress would soon bring.

The drip-tick of the modem changed slightly. Isabel tensed herself, and began to sing. Among the mirrors' many other properties, they amplified her voice, and carried it down the dark valley towards her departing apprentices, and to the farmsteads, and across the walls of the Cathedral of the Word. It was a thrilling, chilling sound, which those who had morning duties were awakened by, and those who did not had long ago learned to sleep though. Far above her, in a rumble like distant thunder, the great mirrors within Ghezirah's orbit poised themselves to turn to face the sun. Another moment, and the modem's drip-tick changed again,

and with it Isabel's song, as, in dazzling pillars, Sabil's light bore down towards every minaret. Isabel tensed in her crucifix and moved her limbs in the ways she had learned; movements which drove the pulleys and pistons that in turn caused the mirrors of her minaret to fan their gathered rays across her valley. Thus, in song and light, each day in Ghezi-rah is born, and Isabel remained no different to any other Dawn-Singer, but for the one fact that, at the crucial moment when first light flashed down to her, she had learned to screw up her eyes.

A typical day, and her work was almost done then until the time came to sing the different songs which called in the night. Sometimes, if there were technical difficulties, or clouds drifted out over from the Floating Ocean, or there was rain, Isabel would have to re-harness herself to her crucifix and struggle hard to keep her valley alight. Sometimes, there were visitors or school parties, but mostly now her time was her own. It wasn't unknown for Dawn-Singers to plead with their apprentices to leave some small job undone each night so they could have the pleasure of absorbing themselves in it through the following day. But, for Isabel, inactivity was easy. She had the knack of the near simple-minded of letting time pass through her as easily as the light and the wind.

One morning, Isabel was inspecting some of the outer mirrors. Such minor tasks, essentially checking that her apprentices were performing their duties as they should, were part of her life. Any blind Dawn-Singer worth her salt could tell from the feel of the air coming off a particular mirror whether it had been correctly polished, and then set at the precise necessary angle on its runners and beds. Touching it, the smear of a single bare fingertip, would have been sacrilege, and sight, in this place of dazzling glass, was of little use. Isabel, in the minaret brightness of her lonely days, rarely thought about looking, and when she did, what she saw was a world dimmed by the blotches which now swam before her eyes. In a few more months, years at the most, she would have been blinded by her work. But as it was, on this particular nondescript day, and just as she had suspected from a resistance which she had felt in the left arm of her crucifix, a mirror in the western quadrant was misaligned. Isabel studied it, feeling the wrongness of the air. It was Mirror 28, and the error was a matter of fractions of second of a degree, and thus huge by her standards. The way Mirror 28 was, it scarcely reflected Sabil's light at all, and made the corner of her minaret where she stood seem relatively dim. Thus, as Isabel wondered whether to try to deal with the problem now or leave it for her apprentices, she regained a little more of her sight.

The valley spread beneath her was already shimmering in those distant times of warm and sudden mornings, and the silver river flashed back the light of her minaret. The few dotted houses were terracotta and white. Another perfect day, but for a slight dullness in the west caused by the particular faulty mirror. The effect, Isabel thought as she strained her aching eyes, was not displeasing. The outer rosestone walls of the Cathedral of the Word, the main structure of which lay far beyond the hills of this valley, had a deep, pleasant glow to them. The shadows seemed fuller.

Inside the walls, there were paved gardens, trees and fountains. Doves clattered, flowers bloomed, insects hummed, statues gestured. Here and there, for no obvious reason, were placed slatted white boxes. Nothing and nobody down there seemed to have noticed that she had failed them today in her duties. Isabel smiled and inhaled the rich, pollen-scented air. It was a minor blemish, and she still felt proud of her work. Near the wall, beside a place where its stones dimpled in towards a gateway, there was a pillared space of open paving. This, too, was of rosestone. Isabel was about to shut her eyes so she could concentrate better on the scene when she heard, the sound carrying faint on the breeze, the unmistakable slap of feet on warm stone. She peered down again, leaning forward over Mirror 28, her unmemorable face captured in reflection as she saw a figure moving far below across the open paving. A young girl, by the look of her. Her hair was flashing gold-bands, as were her arms and ankles. She was dancing, circling, in some odd way which made no sense to Isabel, although she looked graceful in a way beyond anything Isabel could explain.

That night, after she had sung in the darkness, Isabel neglected to mention the fault with Mirror 28 to her apprentices. The next morning, breathing the same warm air at the same westerly corner of her minaret, she listened again to the shift and slap of feet. It was a long time before she opened her eyes, and when she did, her vision seemed clearer. The girl dancing on the rosestone paving had long black hair, and she was dressed in the flashing silks which Isabel associated with alien lands and temples. Rings flashed from her fingers. A bindi glittered at her forehead. Isabel breathed, and watched, and marvelled.

The next blazing day, the day after, Isabel watched again from the top of her minaret beside faulty Mirror 28. It was plainly some ritual. The girl was probably an apprentice, or perhaps a minor acolyte. She was learning whatever trade it was which was practised in the Cathedral of the Word. Isabel remembered, or tried to remember, her own origins. That swarming crowd. Then hunger, thirst. What would have happened if she had been taken instead to this place beyond the wall? Would she have ever been this graceful? Isabel already knew the answer, but still the question absorbed her. In her dreams, the hand which she held as the fighter plane swooped became the same oiled olive colour as that girl's flashing skin. And sometimes, before the thundering feet of her apprentices awakened her to another day of duty, Isabel almost felt as if she, too, was dancing.

One day, the air was different. The Floating Ocean that hung on the horizon was a place of which Isabel understood little, although it was nurtured in Sabil's reflected energies by a specialist Order of her Church. Sometimes, mostly, it was blue. Then it would glitter and grey. Boiling out from it like angry thoughts would come clouds and rain. At these times, as she wrestled on her crucifix, Isabel imagined shipwreck storms, heaving seas. At other times, the clouds which drifted from it would be light and white, although they also interfered with the light in more subtle and often more infuriating ways. But on this particular day, Isabel awoke to feel dampness on her skin, clammy but not unpleasant, and a sense that every sound and creak of this

minaret with which she was now so familiar had changed. The voices of her apprentices, even as they clustered around her, were muffled, and their hair and flesh smelled damp and cold. The whole world, what little she glimpsed of it as she ascended the final staircase and was strapped to her crucifix, had turned grey. The wood at her back was slippery. The harnesses which she had cured and sweated and strained into the shapes of her limbs were loose. She knew that most of the minaret's mirrors were clouding in condensation even before the last of murmuring senior apprentices reported the fact and bowed out of her way.

The sodden air swallowed the first notes of her song. With the mechanisms of the whole minaret all subtly changed, Isabel struggled as she had never struggled before to bring in the day. Sabil's pillar was feeble, and the mirrors were far below their usual levels of reflectivity. Still, it was for mornings such as this for which she had been trained, and she caught this vague light and fanned it across her valley even though she felt as if she was swimming through oceans of clay. And her song, as she finally managed to achieve balance and the clouding began to dissolve in the morning's heat, grew more joyous than ever in her triumph, such that people in the valley scratched the sleep from their heads and thought as they rarely thought; *Ah, there is the Dawn-Singer, bringing the day!* Despite the cold white air, they probably went about their ablutions whistling, confident that some things will never change.

It was several more hours before Isabel was sure that the smaller minds and mechanisms of the minaret had reached their usual equilibrium, and could be trusted to run themselves. But the world, as she climbed down from her crucifix, was still shrouded. *Fog* – she had learned the word in her apprenticeship, although she had thought of it as one of those mythical aberrations, like a comet-strike. But here it was. She wandered the misted balconies and gantries. The light here was diffuse, but ablaze. Soon, she guessed, the power she had brought from her sun would burn this moist white world away. But in the west there was a greater dimness, which was amplified today. Here, the air was almost as chill as it had been before daybreak. Isabel bit her lip and ground her palms. She cursed herself, to have allowed this to come about. What would her old training mistress say! Too late now to attempt to rectify the situation at Mirror 28, with the planes beaded wet and the pistons dripping. She would have to speak to her apprentices this evening, and do her best to pretend sternness. It was what teachers generally did, she had noticed: when they had failed to deal with something, they simply blamed their class. Isabel tried to imagine the scene to the invisible west below. That dancing girl beyond the walls of the Cathedral of the Word would surely find this near-darkness a great inconvenience. The simple, the obvious – the innocent – thing seemed to be to go down and apologize to her.

Isabel descended the many stairways of her minaret. Stepping out into the world outside seemed odd to her now – the ground was so *low!* – but especially today, when, almost mimicking the effects of her fading sight, everything but her minaret which blazed above her was dim and blotched and silvered. She walked between the fields in the direction of the rosetone walls, and heard but didn't see the

animals grazing. Brushing unthinkingly and near-blindly as she now habitually did against things, she followed close to the brambled hedges, and, by the time she felt the dim fiery glow of the wall coming up towards her, her hands and arms were scratched and wet. The stones of the wall were soaked, too. The air here was a damp presence. Conscious that she was entering the dim realm which her own inattention had made, Isabel felt her way along the wall until she came to the door. It looked old and little-used; the kind of door you might find in a story. She didn't know whether to feel surprise when she turned the cold and slippery iron hoop, and felt it give way.

Now, she was in the outer gardens of the Cathedral of the Word, and fully within the shade of faulty Mirror 28. It was darker here, certainly, but her senses and her sight soon adjusted, and Isabel decided that the effect wasn't unpleasant, in some indefinable and melancholy way. In this diffuse light, the trees were dark clouds. The pavements were black and shining. Some of the flowers hung closed, or were beaded with silver cobwebs. A few bees buzzed by her, but they seemed clumsy and half-asleep in this half-light as well. Then, of all things, there was a flicker of orange light; a glow which Isabel's half-ruined eyes refused to believe. But, as she walked towards it, it separated itself into several quivering spheres, bearing with them the smell of smoke, and the slap of bare feet on wet stone.

The open courtyard which Isabel had gazed down on from her minaret was impossible to scale as she stood at the edge of it on this dim and foggy day, although the surrounding pillars which marched off and vanished up into the mist seemed huge, lit by the flicker of the smoking braziers placed between them. Isabel moved forward. The dancer, for a long time, was a sound, a disturbance of the mist. Then, sudden as a ghost, she was there before her.

"Ahlan wa sahan..." She bowed from parted knees, palms pressed together. She smelled sweetly of sweat and sandalwood. Her hair was long and black and glorious. "And who, pray, are you? And what are you doing here?"

Isabel, flustered in a way which she had not felt in ages, stumbled over her answer. The minaret over the wall... She pointed uselessly into the mist. This dimness – no, not the mist itself, but the lack of proper light... The dancer's kohled and oval eyes regarded her with what seemed like amusement. The bindi on her brow glittered similarly. Although the dancer was standing still, her shoulders rose and fell from her exertions. Her looped earrings tinkled.

"So, you bring light from that tower?"

Isabel, who perhaps still hadn't made the matter as clear as she should have, nodded in dizzy relief that this strange creature was starting to understand her. "I'm so *sorry* it's so dark today. I've – I've heard your dancing from my tower, and I – thought... I thought that this oversight would be difficult for you."

"Difficult?" The girl cocked her head sideways like a bird to consider. The flames were still dancing. Their light flicked dark and orange across her arms. "No, I don't think so. In fact, I quite like it. My name's Genya, by the way. I'm a bee-keeper..." She gave a liquid laugh and stepped forward, back, half-fading. "Although, thanks to you, there are few enough bees today need keeping."

"Beekeeper – but I thought these were the gardens of the Cathedral of the Word? I thought you were–"

"– Oh, I'm a *Librarian* as well. Or at least, a most senior apprentice. But some of us must also learn how to keep bees."

Isabel nodded. "Of course. For the honey..."

Again, Genya laughed. There seemed to be little Isabel could do which didn't cause her amusement. "Oh no! Never for *that*! We give the honey away to the poor at our main gates on mouldy days. We keep bees because they teach us how to find the books. Do you want me to show you?"

Isabel was shown. That first day, the misty gardens were nothing but a puzzle to her. There were flowering bushes which she was told by Genya bore within each of their cells whole libraries of information about wars fought and lost. There were stepped crypt-like places beyond creaky iron gates where, through other doors which puffed open once Genya made a gesture, lay bound books of the histories of things that had never happened in this or any other world. They were standing, Genya whispered, reaching up to take down a silvery thing encased in plastic, merely at the furthest shore of the greatest ocean of all possible knowledge. Yet some of these clear, bright, artificially lit catacombs were as big as all but the finest halls of the Dawn Church's own seats of learning.

"What is *that*, anyway?"

It was a rainbow disc. After a small struggle, Genya opened the transparent box which contained it. "I think it contains music." Isabel had to gasp when Genya placed her fingertips upon the surface, so closely did it resemble a mirror. But Genya's fingers moved rapidly in a caressing, circling motion. Her eyes closed for a moment. She started humming. "Yes. *It is* music. An old popular song about fools on hills. It's lovely. I wish I had the voice like you to sing it."

"You can *hear* it from that?"

Genya nodded. "It's something which is done to us Librarians. To our fingers. See..." She raised them towards Isabel's gaze. Close to the end, the flesh seemed raw, like fresh scar tissue. "We're given extra optic nerves. Small magnetic sensors... Processors... Other things..." She snapped the rainbow disc back into its case. "It makes life a lot easier." She tried to demonstrate the same trick with a brown ribbon of tape, the spool of which instantly took off on its own down the long corridor in which they were standing. She hummed, once they had caught up with it, another tune.

"It's all part of being a Librarian, having tickly fingers," Genya announced as she slotted the object back on its shelf. "By the way..." She turned back towards Isabel. "I was under the impression that there was a far worse excruciation for you Dawn-Singers..." Genya leaned forward with a dancer's gaze, peering as no one ever had into the forgotten shade of Isabel's eyes. "You're supposed to be *blind*, aren't you? But it's plain to even the stupidest idiot that you're not..."

Next dawn, the skies were clear again. Once more, the Floating Ocean was calm and distant and blue. Those in that valley who cared to listen to Isabel's song might have thought that day that it sounded slightly perfunctory. But ordinary daybreaks such as these were easy sport for Isabel now. She was even getting used to the different feel of the

minaret which came from the fault in Mirror 28. Under blue skies that only a connoisseur or an acolyte would have noticed a slight darkening of in the western quadrant, she hurried across the fields towards the rosetone walls of the Cathedral of the Word.

Even though their prosecutors were able to argue the facts convincingly the other way, neither Isabel nor Genya ever thought that their acts in those long-ago days of Ghezirah's endless summer amounted to betrayal. They knew that their respective Churches guarded their secrets with all the paranoid dread of the truly powerful, who are left with much to lose and little to gain. They knew, too, of the recent terrors of the War of the Lilies. But their lives had been small. Further up the same rosetone wall, if Isabel had cared to follow it beyond her valley, she would eventually have found that its fine old blocks were pockmarked with sprays of bullets; further still, the stone itself dissolved into shining heaps of dream-distorted lava, and the gardens still heaved with the burrowing teeth of trapmoles. Yet Nashir had suffered far less in the War of the Lilies than many of Ghezirah's islands. In the vast lattice of habitation which surrounded Sabil, there were still huge rents and floating swathes of spinning rubble. Seventeen years is little time to recover from a war, but peace and youth and endless summer are heady brews, and lessons doled out in the Church classrooms by the rap of a mistress's cane sometimes remain forever wrapped in chalkdust and boredom. Day after brilliant day in that backwater of a backwater, Isabel and Genya wandered deeper into the secrets of the Cathedral of the Word's cloisters and gardens. Day after day, they betrayed the secrets of their respective Churches.

The Cathedral and its environs are vast, and the farms and villages and towns and the several cities of Nashir which surround it are mostly there, in one way or another, to serve its needs. Beyond the ridge of Isabel's valley, standing at the lip of stepped gardens which went down and down so far that the light grew blue and hazed, they saw a distant sprawl of stone, glass, spires on the rising horizon.

"Is that the Cathedral?"

Not for the first time that day, Genya laughed. "Oh no! It's just the local Lending Office..." They walked on and down; waterfalls glittering beside them in the distant blaze of a far greater minaret than Isabel's. Another day, rising to the surface from the tunnels of a catacomb from which it had seemed they would never escape, Isabel saw yet another great and fine building. Again, she asked the same question. Again, Genya laughed. Still, within those grounds with their wild white follies and statues and shrines to Dewey, Bliss and Ranganathan, there were many compensations.

As their daily journeys grew further, it became necessary to travel by speedier methods if Isabel was to return to her minaret in time to sing in the night. The catacombs of books were too vast for any Librarian to categorize even the most tightly defined subject without access to rapid transport. So, on the silk seats of caleches which buzzed on cushions of buried energy, they swept along corridors. The bookshelves flashed past them, the titles spinning too fast to read, until the spines themselves became indistinguishable and the individual globelights blurred into a single white stripe overhead. Isabel and Genya laughed and whooped as they urged

their metal craft into yet greater feats of speed and manoeuvrability. The dusty wisdoms of lost ages cooled their faces.

They rarely saw anyone, and then only as faint figures tending some distant stack of books, or the trails of aircraft like scratches across the blue roof of the Ghezirahan sky. Genya's training, the dances and the indexing and – for an exercise, the sub-categorizing of the lesser tenses of the verb meaning *to blink* in 68 lost languages – came to her through messages even more remote than the tick of Isabel's modem. Sometimes, the statues spoke to her. Sometimes, the flowers gave off special scents, or the furred leaves of a bush communicated something in their touch to her. But, mostly, Genya learned from her bees.

One day, Isabel succumbed to Genya's repeated requests and led her to the uppermost reaches of her minaret. Genya laughed as she peered down from the spiralling stairways as they ascended. The drops, she claimed, leaning far across the worn brass handrails, were dizzying. Isabel leaned over as well; she'd never thought to *look* at her minaret in this way. Seen from the inside, the place was like a huge vertical tunnel, threaded with sunlight and dust and the slow tickings of vast machinery, diminishing down towards seeming infinity.

"Why is it, anyway, that you Dawn-Singers need to be blinded?" Genya asked as they climbed on, her voice by now somewhat breathless.

"I suppose it's because we become blind soon enough – a kind of mercy. That, and because we have access to such high places. We Dawn-Singers know how to combine lenses..." Isabel paused on a stair for a moment as a new thought struck her, and Genya bumped into her back. "So perhaps the other Churches are worried about what, looking down, we might see..."

"I'm surprised anyone ever gets to the top of this place without dying of exhaustion. Your apprentices must have legs like trees!" But they did reach the top, and Isabel felt the pride she always felt at her minaret's gathered heat and power, whilst Genya, when she had recovered, moved quickly from balcony to silvery balcony, exclaiming at the views. Isabel was little used to seeing anything up here, but she saw through her fading eyes many reflected images of her friend, darting mirror to mirror with her pretty silks trailing behind her like flocks of coloured birds. Isabel smiled. She felt happy, and the happiness was different to the happiness she felt each dawn. Chasing the reflections, she finally found the real Genya standing on the gantry above Mirror 28.

"It's darker here."

"Yes. This mirror has a fault in it."

"This must have been where you first saw me..." Genya chuckled. "I thought the light had changed. The colours were suddenly deeper. For a while, it even had the bees confused. Sometimes, the sunlight felt almost cool as I danced though it – more soothing. But I suppose that was your gaze..."

They both stared down at the gardens of the Cathedral of the Word. They looked glorious, although the pillared space where Genya had danced seemed oddly vacant without her. Isabel rubbed her sore eyes as bigger blotches than usual swam before them. She said, "You've never told me

about that dance."

"It's supposed to be a secret."

"But then, so are many things."

They stood there for a long time amid the minaret's shimmering light, far above the green valley and the winding rosestone wall. Today felt different. Perhaps they were growing too old for these trysts. Perhaps things would have to change... The warm wind blew past them. The Floating Ocean glittered. The trees murmured. The river gleamed. Then, with a rising hum like a small machine coming to life, a bee which had risen the thermals to this great height blundered against Isabel's face. Somehow, it settled there. She felt its spiky legs, then the brush of Genya's fingers as she lifted the creature away.

"I'll show you the dance now, if you like."

"Here? But—"

"— just watch."

From her cupped hands, Genya laid the insect on the gapped wooden boards. It sat there for a moment in the sunlight, slowly shuffling its wings. It looked stunned. "This one's a white-tail. Of course, she's a worker – and a *she*. They do all the work, just like in Ghezirah. Most likely she's been sent out this morning as a scout. Many of them never come back, but the ones that do, and if they've found some fine new source of nectar, tell the hive about it when they return..." Genya stooped. She rubbed her palms, and held them close to the insect and breathed their scent towards it, making a sound as she did so – a deep-centred hum. She stepped back. "Watch..." The bee preened her antennae and quivered her thorax and shuffled her wings. She wiggled back, and then forwards, her small movements describing jerky figures-of-eight. "They use your minaret as a signpost..." Genya murmured as the bee continued dancing. Isabel squinted; there *was* something about its movements which reminded her of Genya on the rosestone paving. "That, and the pull and spin of all Ghezirah. It's called the waggly dance. Most kinds of social bees do it, and its sacred to our Church as well."

Isabel chuckled, delighted. "The waggly dance?!"

"Well, there are many longer and more serious names for it."

"No, no – it's lovely... Can you tell where's she been?"

"Over the wall, of course. And she can't understand why there's hard ground up here, up where the sun should be. She thinks we're probably flowers, but no use for nectar-gathering."

"You can tell all of *that*?"

"What would be the point, otherwise, in her dancing? It's the same with us Librarians. Our dance is a ritual we use for signalling where a particular book is to be found."

Isabel smiled at her friend. The idea of someone dancing to show where a book lay amid the Cathedral of the Word's maze of tunnels, buildings and catacombs seemed deliciously impractical, and quite typical of Genya. The way they were both standing now, Isabel could see their two figures clearly reflected in Mirror 28's useless upper convex. She was struck as she always was by Genya's effortless beauty – and then by her own plainness. Isabel was dull as a shadow, even down to the greyed leather jerkin and shorts she was wearing, her mousey hair which had been cropped with blind effi-

ciency, and then held mostly back by a cracked rubber band. She could, in fact, almost have been Genya's shade. It was a pleasant thought – the two of them combined in the light which she brought to this valley each day – but at the same time, the reflection bothered Isabel. For a start, Mirror 28 poured darkness instead of light from her minaret. Even its name felt cold and steely, like a premonition...

Isabel mouthed something. A phrase: *the fault in Mirror 28*. It was a saying which was to become popular throughout the Ten Thousand and One Worlds, signifying the small thing left undone from which many other larger consequences, often dire, will follow...

"What was that?"

"Oh... Nothing..."

The bee, raised back into the air by Genya's hands, flew away. The two young women sat talking on the warm decking, exchanging other secrets. There were intelligent devices, Isabel learned, which roamed the aisles of the Cathedral of the Word, searching, scanning, reading, through dusty centuries in pursuit of some minor truth. They were friendly enough when you encountered them, even if they looked like animated coffins. Sometimes, though, if you asked them nicely, they would put aside their duties and let you climb on their backs and take you for a ride...

The modem was ticking. Another day was passing. It was time for Genya to return beyond the walls of the Cathedral of the Word. Usually, the two young women were heedlessly quick with their farewells, but, on this blazing afternoon, Isabel felt herself hesitating, and Genya reached out, tracing with her ravaged and sensitive fingers the unmemorable outlines of her friend's face. Isabel did so too. Although her flesh then was no more remarkable than she was, she had acquired a blind person's way of using touch for sight.

"Tomorrow...?"

"Yes?" They both stepped back from each other, embarrassed by this sudden intimacy.

"Will you dance for me – down on that paving? Now that I know what it's for, I'd love to watch you dance again."

Genya smiled. She gave the same formal bow which she had given when they had first met, then turned and began her long descent of the minaret's stairs. By the time she had reached the bottom, Isabel had already strapped herself into her crucifix and was saying her preliminary prayers as she prepared to sing out another day. Unstarred darkness beautiful as the dawn itself washed across all Ghezirah, and Isabel never saw her friend again.

Of the many secrets attributed to the Dawn Church, Isabel still knew relatively few. She didn't know for example, that light, modulated in ways beyond anything she could feel with her human senses, can bear immense amounts of data. As well as singing in the dawn each day from her crucifix, she also heedlessly bore floods of information which passed near-instantly across the valley, and finally, flashing minaret to minaret, returned to the place where it had mostly originated, which was the gleaming island of Jerita, where all things pertaining to the Dawn Church must begin and end. Even before Isabel had noticed it herself, some part of the great Intelligence which governed the runnings of her Church had noted, much as a great conductor will notice the off-tuning of a sin-

gle string in an orchestra, a certain weakness in the returning message from the remote but nevertheless important island of Nashir where the Cathedral of the Word spread its vast roots and boughs. To the Intelligence, this particular dissonance could only be associated with one minaret, and then to a particular mirror, numbered 28. The Intelligence had many other concerns, but it began to monitor the functioning of that minaret more closely, noticing yet more subtle changes which could not be entirely ascribed to the varying weather or the increasing experience of a new acolyte. In due course, certain human members of the Church were also alerted, and various measures were put in hand to establish the cause of this inattention, the simplest of which involved a midday visit to the dormitories beside the river in Isabel's valley, where apprentices were awoken and quietly interrogated about the behaviour of their new mistress, then asked if they might be prepared to forgo sleep and study their mistress from some hidden spot using delicate instruments with which would, of course, be provided.

The morning after Isabel had watched the bee's dance dawned bright and sweet as ever. The birds burst into song. The whole valley, to her fading eyes, was a green fire. Still, she was sure that, if she used her gaze cautiously, and looked to the side which was less ravaged, she would be able to watch Genya dance. Her breath quickened as she ascended the last stairway. She felt as if she was translucent, swimming through light. Then, of all things, and amplified by mechanisms which mimicked the human inner ear, the doorway far at the base of her minaret sounded the coded knock which signified the urgent needs of another member of her Church. In fact, there were two people waiting at Isabel's doorway. One bore a stern and sorrowful demeanour, whilst the other was a new acolyte, freshly blinded. Even before they had touched hands and faces, Isabel knew that this acolyte had come to replace her. Although she was standing on the solid ground of Ghezirah, she felt as if she was falling.

Unlike many other details of Isabel's life, facts of her trial are relatively well recorded. Strangely, or perhaps not, the Church of the Word is less free in publishing its proceedings, although much can be adduced from secondary sources. The tone of the press reports, for example, is astonishingly fevered. Even before they had had the chance to admit their misdeeds, Isabel and Genya were both labelled as criminals and traitors. They were said to be lovers, too, in every possible sense apart from the true one. They were foolhardy, dangerous – rabid urchins who had been rescued from the begging-bowl gutters of Ghezirah by their respective Churches, and had repaid that kindness with perfidy and deceit. Did people really feel so badly towards them? Did anyone ever really imagine that what they had done was any different to the innocent actions of the young throughout history? The facts may be plain, but such questions, from this distance of time, remain unanswerable. It should be remembered, though, that Ghezirah was still recovering from the War of the Lilies, and that the Churches, in this of all times, needed to reinforce the loyalty of their members. It was time for an example to be made – and for the peace to be shown for what it really was, which was shaky and incomplete and dangerous. For this role, Isabel and Genya were chosen.

As a rule, the Churches do not kill their errant acolytes. Instead, they continue to use them. Isabel, firstly, had her full sight, and then more, returned to her in lidless eyes of crystal which could never blink. Something was also done to her flesh which was akin to the operations that had been performed on Genya's fingertips. Finally, but this time in a great minaret on the Church's home island of Jerita, she was returned to her duties as a Dawn-Singer. But dawn for her now became a terrible thing, and the apprentices and clerks and lesser acolytes who lived and worked for their Church around the forested landscapes of the Windfare Hills returned from their night's labours to agonized screams. Still, Isabel strove to perform her duties, although the light was pure pain to the diamonds of her lidless eyes and the blaze of sunlight was molten lead to flesh which now felt the slightest breeze as a desert gale.

No one's mind, not even Isabel's, could sustain such torment indefinitely. As the years passed, it is probable that the portions of her brain which suffered most were slowly destroyed even though the sensors in her scarred and shining flesh continued working. Isabel in her decline became a common sight amid the forests and courtyards of the lesser academies of the Windfare Hills; a stooped figure, wandering and muttering in the painful daylight which she had brought, wrapped in cloths and bandages despite the summer's endless warmth; an object lesson in betrayal, her glittering eyes always shaded, averted in pain. She was given alms. Everyone knew her story, and felt that they had suffered with her – or at least that she had suffered for them. She was treated mostly with sadness, kindness, sympathy. The nights, though, were Isabel's blessing. She wandered under the black skies almost at ease, brushing her fingers across the cooling stones of statues, listening to the sigh of the trees.

Perhaps she remembered Mirror 28, or that day of fog when she first met Genya. More likely, being Isabel, there was no conscious decision involved in the process of bringing, slowly, day by day and year by year, a little less light across to the stately rooftops and green hills of this portion of Jerita other than a desire to reduce her own suffering. People, though, noted the new coolness of the air, the difference of the light amid these hills, and, just as Genya and Isabel had once done, they found it pleasantly melancholy. The Church's Intelligence, too, must have been aware in its own way of these happenings, although this was perhaps what it had always intended. People began to frequent the Windfare Hills because of these deeper shadows, the whisper of leaves from the seemingly dying trees blowing across lawns and down passageways. They lit fires in the afternoons to keep themselves warm, and found thicker clothes. It is likely that few had ever travelled beyond Ghezirah, or were even aware of the many worlds which glory in the phenomena called *seasons*. Only the plants, despite all the changes which had been wrought on them, understood. As Isabel, who had long had nothing to lose, one day took the final step of letting darkness continue to hang for many incredible moments over Windfare whilst all the rest of Jerita ignited with dawn, the trees clicked their branches and shed a few more leaves into the chill mists, and remembered. And waited.

This, mostly, is the story of Isabel of the Fall as it is commonly told. The days grew duller across the Windfare Hills. The nights lengthened. A ragged figure, failing and arthritic, Isabel finally came to discover, by accidentally thrusting her hand into the pillar of Sabil's light which poured into her minaret, that the blaze which had caused her so much pain could also bring a blissful end to all sensation. She knew by then that she was dying. And she knew that her ruined, blistered flesh – as she came to resemble an animated pile of the charcoal sticks of the leavings of autumnal fires – was the last of the warnings with which her Church had encumbered her. Limping and stinking, she wandered further afield across the Dawn Church's island of Jerita. Almost mythical already, she neglected her duties to the extent that her minaret, probably without her noticing in the continuing flicker of short and rainy days, was taken from her. The desire for these seasons had spread by now across Ghezirah. Soon, as acolytes of the Green Church learned how to reactivate the genes of plants which had once coped with such conditions, spring was to be found in Culgaith, and chill winter in Abuzeid. The spinning islands of Ghezirah were changed forever. And, at long last, in this world of cheerful sadness and melancholy joy which only the passing of seasons can bring, the terrors of the War of the Lilies became a memory.

One day, Isabel of the Fall was dragging herself and what remained of her memories across a place of gardens and fountains. A cool wind blew. The trees here were the colour of flame, but at the same time she was almost sure that the enormous building which climbed ahead of her could only be the Cathedral of the Word. She looked around for Genya and grunted to herself – she was probably off playing hide and seek. Isabel staggered on, the old wrappings which had stuck to her burnt flesh dragging behind her. She looked, as many now remarked, like a crumpled leaf; the very spirit of this new season of autumn. She even smelled of decay and things burning. But she still had the sight which had been so ruthlessly given to her, and the building ahead... The building ahead seemed to have no end to its spires...

Cold rains rattled across the lakes. Slowly, day by day, Isabel approached the last great citadel of her Church, which truly did rise all the way to the skies, and then beyond them. The Intelligence that dwelt there had long been expecting her, and opened its gates, and refreshed the airs of its corridors and stairways which Isabel, with the instincts of a Dawn-Singer, had no need to be encouraged to climb. Day and darkness flashed through the arrowslit windows as she ascended. Foods and wines would appear at turns and landings, cool and bland for her wrecked palate. Sometimes, hissing silver things passed her, or paused to enquire if they could carry her, but Isabel remained true to the precepts and vanities of her Church, and disdained such easy ways of ascension. It was a long, hard climb. Sometimes, she heard Genya's husky breath beside her, her exclamations and laughter as she looked down and down into the huge wells which had opened beneath. Sometimes, she was sure she was alone. Sometimes, although her blackened face had lost all sensation and her eyes were made of crystal, Isabel of the Fall was sure she was crying. But still she climbed.

The roof that covers the islands of Ghezirah is usually

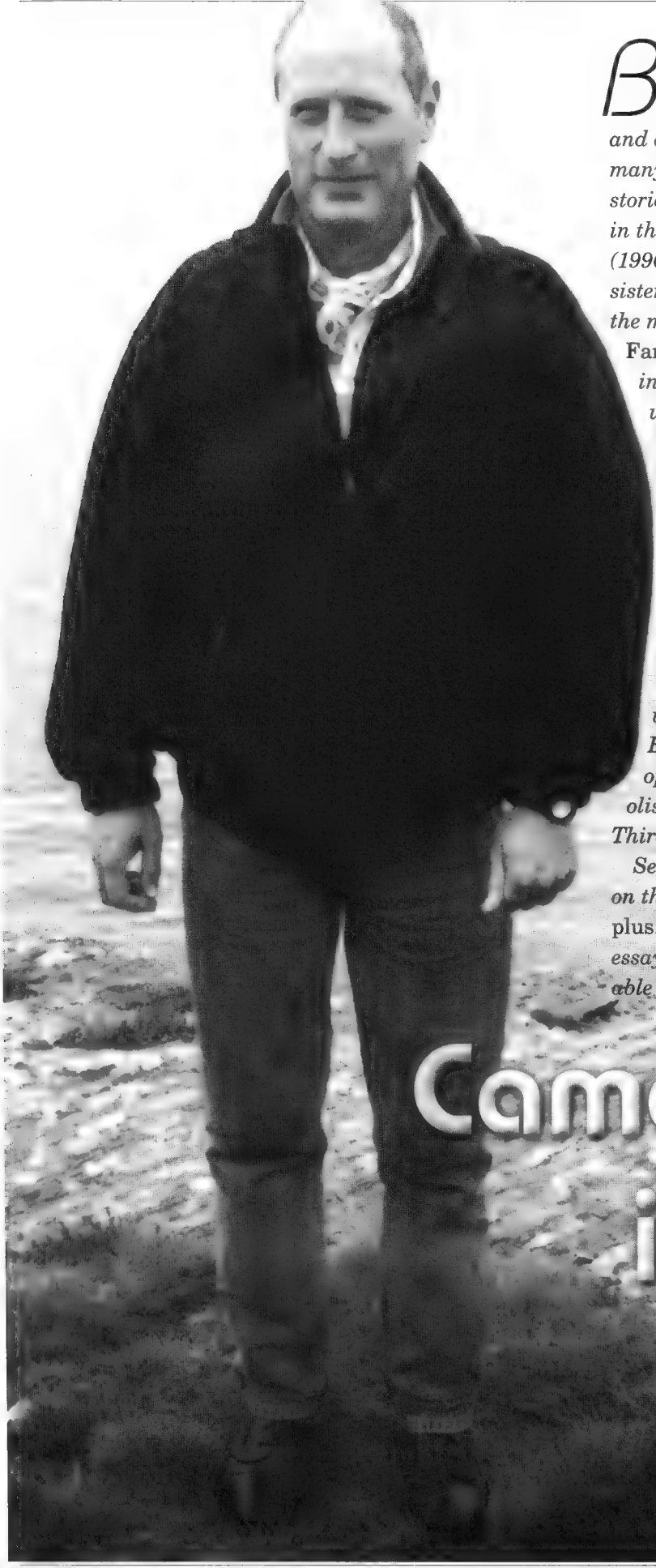
accessed, by the rare humans and aliens who do such things, by the use of aircraft and hummingbird caleches. Still, it had seemed right to the forgotten architects of the Dawn Church that there should be one last tower and staircase which ascended all of the several miles to the top of Ghezirah's skies. By taking the way which always led *up*, and as the other towers and minarets fell far beneath her, Isabel found that way, that last spire, and followed it. Doorways opened. The Intelligence led her on. She never felt alone now, and even her pain fell behind her. Finally, though, she came to a doorway which would not open. It was a plain thing, round-lipped and with a wheel at its centre which refused to turn. A light flashed above it. Perhaps this was some kind of warning. Isabel considered. She sat there for many days. Food appeared and disappeared. She could go back down again, although she knew she would never survive the journey. She could go on, but that light... Over to her left, she saw eventually, was some sort of suit. A silvered hat, boots, a cape. They looked grand, expensive. Surely not for her? But then she remembered the food, the sense of a presence. She pulled them on over her rags, or rather the things pulled themselves over her when she approached them. Now, the wheel turned easily, even before she had reached out to it. Beyond was disappointing; a tiny space little more than the size of a wardrobe. But then there was a sound of hissing, and a door similar to one which had puzzled her spun its wheel, and opened. Isabel stepped out.

The great interior sphere of Ghezirah hung spinning. Everywhere within this glittering ball, there were mirrors wide as oceans. Everywhere, there was darkness and light. And Sabil hung at the centre of it, pluming white; a living fire. Isabel gasped. She had never seen anything so beautiful – not even Genya dancing. She climbed upwards along the gantries through stark shadows. Something of her Dawn-Singer's knowledge told her that these mirrors were angled for night, and that, even in the unpredictable drift of these new seasons, they would soon bring dawn across Ghezirah. She came to the lip of one vast reflector, and considered it. At this pre-dawn moment, bright though it was, its blaze was a mere ember. Then, leaning over it as she had once leaned over Mirror 28 with Genya, Isabel did something she had never done before. She touched the surface of the mirror. There was no sense left in her ravaged hands, but, even through the gloves of her suit and Sabil's glare and hard vacuum, it felt smooth, cool, perfect. The mirror was vast – the size of a small planet – and it curved in a near-endless parabola. Isabel understood that for such an object to move at all, and then in one moment, it could not possibly be made of glass, or any normal human substance. But, at the same time, it looked and felt solid. Without quite knowing what she was doing, but sensing that the seconds before dawn were rapidly passing, Isabel climbed onto the edge of the mirror. Instantly, borne by its slippery energies, she was sliding, falling. The seconds passed. The mirror caught her. Held her. She waited. She thought of the insects that she sponged from so many mirrors in her nights as an apprentice, their bodies fried by the day's heat. But dawn was coming... For the last time, as all the mirrors moved in unison to bear Sabil's energies towards the sleeping islands of Ghezirah below, Isabel spread her arms to welcome her sun. Joyously, as the light flashed heat on her, she sang in the dawn.

In some versions of this tale, Isabel is said to have fallen towards Sabil, and thus to have gained her name. In others, she is called simply Isabel of the Autumn and her final climb beyond the sky remains unmentioned. In some, she is tragically beautiful, or beautifully ugly. The real truth remains lost, amid much else about her. But in the Dawn Church itself Isabel of the Fall is still revered, and amidst its many mysteries it is said that one of Ghezirah's great internal reflectors still bears the imprint of her vaporized silhouette, which is the only blemish on all of its mirrors that the Church allows. And somewhere, if you know where to look amidst all Ghezirah's many islands, and at the right time of day and in the correct season, there is a certain wall in a certain small garden where Isabel's shape can be seen, pluming down from the minarets far above; traversing the hours brick to mossy brick as a small shadow.

As for Genya, she is often forgotten at the end of this story. She touches Isabel's face for a last time, smiles, bows and vanishes down the stairways of the minaret towards oblivion. But the fact that she was also punished by her Church remains beyond doubt, and the punishment was as cruel and purposeful in its own way as that which was visited on Isabel. Genya retained all her senses, her special fingertips, even briefly her skills as a dancer; what her Church took from her was the ability to *understand*. She was then set the task of transcribing many manuscripts from one dead language to another, dictating, recording, endlessly reading and reciting with every input of her eyes and flesh. There were unearthing stories of princesses and dragons, equations over which geniuses would have wept, but the meaning of them all passed though Genya unnoticed. Genya became a stupid but useful vessel, and she grew ancient and proficient and fat in a pillowed crypt in the far depths of the Cathedral of the Word, where the windows look out on the turning stars and new acolytes were taken to see her – the famous Genya who had once loved Isabel and betrayed her Church; now white and huge, busy and brainless as a maggot as she rummaged through endless torrents of words. But there are worse fates, and Genya lacked the wisdom to suffer. And she wasn't soulless – somewhere, deep within the rolls of fat and emptiness, all those spinning words, she was still Genya. When she died, muttering the last sentence of an epic which no other Librarian or machine could possibly have transcribed, that part of her passed on with the manuscript to echo and remain held forever somewhere amid all the vast cliff-faces of books in the Cathedral of the Word. To this day, within pages such as these, Genya can still sometimes be found, beautiful as she once was, dancing barefoot across the warm rosetone paving on an endless summer's morning in the time which was always long ago.

Ian R. MacLeod's first two published stories, "Through" and "Well-Loved," appeared in *Interzone* (issues 30 and 34, Jul./Aug. 1989 and Mar./Apr. 1990), and he has written three stories for us since. Over the past decade he has built a considerable reputation, mainly in American magazines and best-of-the-year anthologies, and it is good to welcome him back to these pages. He continues to live in Sutton Coldfield, near Birmingham, and is the subject of the interview which follows.



*B*orn in 1956, Ian R. MacLeod is one of the unsung masters of British sf. A fine prose artist in extraordinary command of setting and atmosphere, MacLeod is chiefly known for his many moody and intricately characterized short stories and novellas, some of which are assembled in the Arkham House volume *Voyages by Starlight* (1996). Uncollected and subsequent pieces are consistently impressive, and have tended to appear in the major sf markets *Interzone*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Asimov's*; they include the remarkable World Fantasy Award-winning short novel "The Summer Isles" (1998), a fascinating and complex examination of a fascist alternate Britain.

Ian MacLeod has published only one full-length novel, *The Great Wheel* (1997, USA only), but it matches the quality of his short fiction on every level, and eminently deserves the wider circulation that British (and paperback) publication could lend it. One of the finest sf novels of the last decade, it pictures with enthralling sombre intensity a future Europe of constricting plenty and its mirror-opposite, the pullulating impoverished metropolis of a North Africa become host to the entire Third World.

Several of MacLeod's short stories can be found on the *Infinity Plus* website (<http://www.infinity-plus.co.uk>), where his superb autobiographical essay, "A Truncated Life in Books," is also available (www.infinityplus.co.uk/misc/imacbio.htm).

Camera work in Words

Ian R. MacLeod
interviewed by
Nick Gevers

NG: In virtually all of your work, there's a profound sense of place, not unlike that achieved by, say, Lucius Shepard, or Jack Vance. What would you say has allowed you such mastery of description, both of physical locations and of the moods they evoke?

IRM: A lot of what any writer writes simply stems from what they like to see and read themselves. In books and films, and art in general, I love atmosphere; a lush and vivid sense of place. Films in particular appeal to me if the camerawork is exceptionally good. I can merrily put up with the work of directors like Ridley Scott and Kubrick and Nick Roeg even when the film itself isn't one of their best. So I guess that's what I try to achieve with my own work: good camerawork.

Although I'm probably not a big user of what you might call "a sense of wonder" in my fiction, a sense of place does probably play that role for me. Imagine, even here and now – the things we're doing, feeling, seeing; the whole world that's happening about us! Yet we all tend to stagger through far too much of our lives in a daze, and I think that art of any kind is a way of fighting against that. So, whenever a character steps into a room, or out of a rocketship, that sense of place is vital. It's something I want to get over to my readers because I want to experience it myself.

NG: Another great strength of your writing is the manner in which it captures the intimacy and fragility of personal relationships. What has been the basis for the keen and sympathetic understanding you bring to this subject?

IRM: Good fiction of any kind needs interesting and believable personal relationships. That's just my basic perception. I know that there's a debate going back many years in sf about "lack of characterization," but to me good sf has always had strong and believable characters, just like every other kind of good fiction. The sf of ideas alone (and I don't really think there's ever been that much of it) has never been of great interest to me. I also think that as you get older, you tend to hang up your ray guns and concentrate more on the person than on the hardware surrounding them.

NG: You write with remarkable feeling about childhood, as in your major story "Grownups," and in the flashback segments of *The Great Wheel*. How is it that you can still capture the essence of youth so accurately and atmospherically?

IRM: Childhood is a time when every-

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thing seems more vivid, more frightening, more intense, more exciting. How can any of us extinguish that feeling of the Christmas stocking at the bottom of the bed, the first kiss, the first bicycle, the first time we got lost? These things remain with us, and, no matter how much we spend on our new car or PC, it's never going to beat the feeling of finally getting the missing bubblegum card in your *Man from Uncle* collection. Of course, I'm romanticizing, but to me the appeal of childhood as a realm to explore stems very much from its newness and brightness.

There's also a more practical basis for the attractions of childhood, which is simply that all the strange bits of whatever world you're creating will be new to a child even if they're taken for granted by everyone else. You can have mysteries (and explanations) which wouldn't work through the eyes of an adult character.

NG: The literary topics and techniques we've discussed so far are traditionally the concern of naturalistic "mainstream" literature. Most of your stories

indeed have a distinctly "mainstream" texture; with this creative makeup, what nonetheless impelled you to become an sf and fantasy writer?

IRM: I wonder about that myself! In fact, I've thought about that quite a bit lately. I might even have an answer... But before I give it, I'd like to say how much I dislike these categories! For me, for a start, sf, horror and fantasy are all the same genre; they're fantastic fiction – they deal with the more-than-ordinary. And "mainstream" as a genre doesn't really exist even in this loose sense if you look at it book by book. If you consider a few recent "mainstream" successes, say, Nick Hornby's novels, and *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, and the *Bridget Jones* books, you'll see that they have little in common other than that they're put on the same shelves. I think publishers and booksellers (and readers and writers) do us and themselves a grave disservice by slotting writers into these silly categories. No one told Homer or Mary Shelley or Jonathan Swift, oh, that's sf, so we'd better put your work over there, in the far corner. No one really seems to mind about a broadly popular film like *The Sixth Sense* being what, if it were a book, would be narrowly categorized as (horror of horrors) "horror." Sf, as I'd like to see it, is just a particular aspect of fiction, and should be read and appreciated as such.

Having said all of that, I'll get off my hobbyhorse, and accept that, well, there is a certain *something* that sf has... When I was a mid-teenager, I can well remember that I had a sort of vague/exact idea as I scanned through the sf shelves in the library of the sort of thing I wanted to read. I'd get a book out, hoping that this one would be *it*. It rarely was, but I can remember the feeling that used to come over me just from looking at a title. It was an ache; I still sometimes get it.

Sf ceased to be the main part of my reading diet when I was about 16 or 17. One minute I was reading Asimov, and he seemed like the best thing in the world, and the next I was reading D. H. Lawrence, and he seemed as good in a different, and, I have to say, more sophisticated and resonant, way. The sf writers I stuck with through this phase of discovering literature were the ones you'd probably expect – Ballard, Silverberg of the era of *Born with the Dead*, Disch, Ellison, Keith Roberts. And then there were writers like John Fowles and William Golding and Thomas Pynchon who were coming at the edges of fantastic literature from the other side, so to speak. And there was *Dangerous Visions*, and the New Wave, and 2001! It was an exciting time in sf, which I was just about

able to track from the paperback racks of the newsagents and the shelves of the public library.

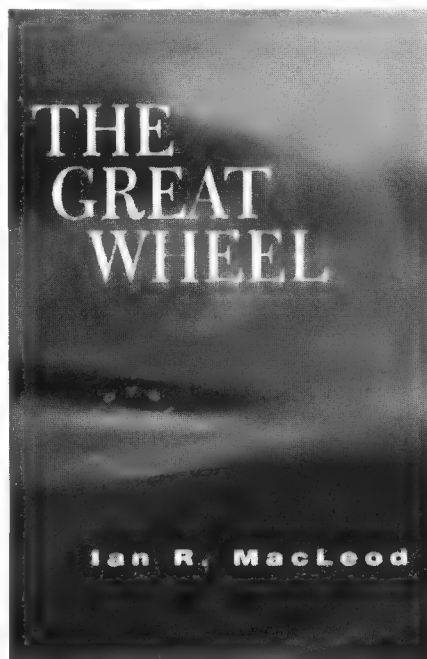
By my early 20s, when I was experimenting with writing myself, I thought that sf would probably develop into one of the major ways of expression in "serious" (i.e. not simply entertainment) fiction. All the evidence seemed to be there. It was hip. It dealt with the here-and-now, and beyond, in a world filled with changes. It took risks with style and substance and censorship. Some of it was beautifully written. When I go into bookshops now, it's pretty obvious to me that sf travelled on a different course to the one I thought it was headed on, but I think that, for me, the buzz I get from writing still comes from whatever this thing is that I've attempted to describe – this meeting of the ways. I guess I really thought that sf would become the so-called "mainstream" (or a significant part of it). In effect, I'm still gazing at the titles of books, and stuck with that same old ache, and trying to write some stuff of my own which might actually resemble the way I think fiction should be.

NG: Your career began just as those of those of quite a few other new British sf writers were beginning, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Were you conscious back then of being part of a definite school of authors (the so-called Britpack)? And are you aware of significant differences between contemporary British sf (such as you write) and the sf of other countries, particularly the USA?

IRM: I do know (or have at least met!) a fair number of these writers, but I can't imagine that any of them think of themselves as anything other than individuals trying to do their own thing.

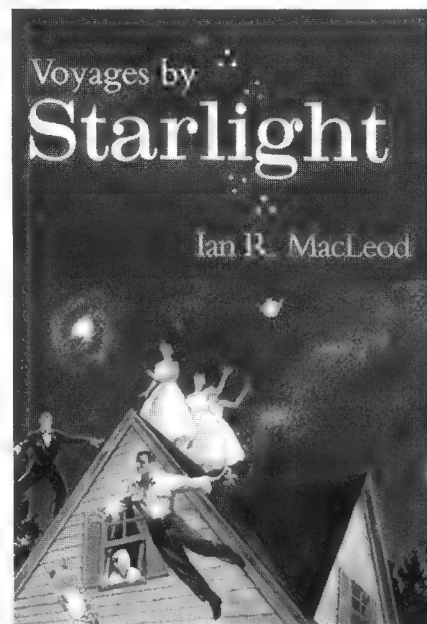
I wouldn't want to hazard too much of an opinion on the difference between countries. I've always thought of modern sf as essentially American because of its optimism, and its obsession with the new and with frontiers – something on which the writers of other countries have played increasingly wild variations. I've never seen that as a problem, as I accept that the USA has been the dominant culture of the last century. One small point which has struck me, though, and which other people might have a view on, is that British (European, for that matter) sf has always tended to lean further towards the political left. Writers like Pohl might send up capitalism, but their work still tends to depict successful capitalist futures.

NG: From there, then: are there any writers, sf (or otherwise), whom you see as especial influences on your own



work?

IRM: Eight desert island writers, eh? I reckon that the really big influences tend to come to you pretty early. On that basis, I have to mention Tolkien; I don't think any book has ever made a bigger impact on me than *Lord of the Rings* did when I read it, so he must be in there somewhere as an influence. Within sf, the writers I still think about most and come back to are Keith Roberts, mid-period Silverberg, Ray Bradbury and J.G. Ballard and Ursula Le Guin. I also have a lot of time for Steven King; he's a writer who's more than capable of being truly great, although (and we've all heard this one before) I think he writes far too much. Of the younger sf writers, I've enjoyed recent works by Paul McAuley, Greg Egan and Kim Stanley Robinson. But it does tend to be the



older stuff I go back to for focus and inspiration.

Of the major writers, I particularly love Thomas Hardy, and Proust, and D. H. Lawrence and F. Scott Fitzgerald and Hemingway. These are the writers I probably return to the most, and would find it hardest to live without. Of writers who are still actually alive, I think I'd have to choose John Updike because of the sheer brilliance of his writing and his preparedness to take risks in all sorts of directions. In poetry, I particularly value Hardy again, and T.S. Eliot and Sylvia Plath and John Betjeman.

You haven't asked me specifically about other areas of art as influences, but I'll have to mention music and film, because they're as important to me as books. I have a huge appetite for the later classical composers like Mahler, Elgar and Strauss. In rock music, I've always devoured the work of Steely Dan, and Robert Fripp and King Crimson in its various incarnations, and songwriters like Joni Mitchell, Tom Waits, Richard Thompson and Nanci Griffith. I also enjoy modern stuff like Air and Massive Attack – partly, I suspect, because of the way they push at many musical boundaries – and the jazz of musicians like Keith Jarrett and Pat Metheny and Bill Evans. Lyrics and poetry are probably also a fairly big influence on me stylistically. I'll often start a sentence not knowing how it's going to end, other than that its goes de dee de du de dum...

There are one or two films in particular which I have to mention as well before this becomes a shopping list. Nick Roeg's *Don't Look Now* and *Bad Timing*. Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America*. Tornatore's *Cinema Paradiso*. Kubrick's *2001*. More recently, a film called *Breaking the Waves* directed by Lars von Trier. All of these made a huge impact on me.

If there's a theme which runs through all my influences, I think it's a sense of risk and a willingness to challenge boundaries. *Don't Look Now*, for example, is so much more than a ghost story. It's sexy and it's sad and it's gloriously atmospheric and the characters matter and it's dazzlingly directed, filled with rippling darkness and flashes of colour. It's high art turned from an essentially trashy subject, and people were moved and shocked, and complained about it. As a writer, I could live with doing some of the same.

NG: You've published just one novel so far, and many short stories and novellas. What has led you to specialize so much in shorter forms?

IRM: It's not a deliberate decision. Looking at my bookshelves, however, I

do seem to have a great many short-story collections. I do find a lot of sf writers I enjoy at shorter length are disappointing when it comes to novel length, and there's an old, old theory which Kingsley Amis propounded in *New Maps of Hell* that sf works best at novella length. In that space, one idea can be expanded and brought to a conclusion. At longer length, and without some of the merits of a strong sense of character and place I'd expect to get from any novel, sf often just becomes a sort of adventure pastiche, which obviously isn't something I've ever chased after. Added to that, I think I've always been pretty ambitious as a writer, and I suspect that, in trying to produce novels which haven't always quite come together particularly easily, my ambition to write (and deal with that old ache) has sometimes exceeded my ability to do it. Writing's hugely to do with confidence as well, and I have sometimes wondered, when it came to the trials and tribulations of actually getting my novels published, if there was anyone else out there who actually wanted to read the sort of thing I was interested in writing. That last bit does tend to slow you down!

NG: Some of your stories, such as "Green," "Sealight," "The Noonday Pool" and "Nina-with-the-Sky-in-Her-Hair," are overt fairy tales; why is it that your fantasy writing so often seems to take this direction?

IRM: As a reader, and much as I loved and still love Tolkien, I don't have a great deal of time for people riding around on horseback and singing in italics. I've tried it as a writer, but I think I probably need an edge which I haven't quite found how to generate in a whole world with lakes and seas with Celtic-sounding names. Having said that, I am working on a fantasy novel – but it fits more easily into the fairy tale category you've mentioned, and is really an alternative view of industrial Victorian England tinged with magical realism, and has proved to be one of my most difficult projects. When the world gets to see it, it'll be called *The Light Ages*.

NG: A recurrent motif to be found in your fiction is that of nostalgic and curative return, the re-examination of a life, its pessimistic or reinvigorating reassessment. Your recent story, "Two Sleepers," and your forthcoming novella, "New Light on the Drake Equation," neatly illustrate this trend. Why is memory such a concern for you?

IRM: I think we're back to childhood here – or at least the early innocence of young adult experience. Writing sf,

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of course, allows you to bring the past and the future to face each other in many far more weird and literal and thrilling ways than naturalistic fiction might allow. So why not do it?!

NG: Quite a few of your stories – "Verglas," "Nevermore," and "New Light on the Drake Equation" come immediately to mind, as does the novel *The Great Wheel* – feature male protagonists who remain cautiously behind while their wives or girlfriends leap enthusiastically into novelty and transformation. Are you deliberately revising traditional gender roles here, as your upcoming novella "Breathmoss" would also seem to indicate?

IRM: I'd need to get on the couch with Dr Freud to explain this one, although I am aware of it! In practical terms, when you structure short fiction, it's often the case that the main character is passive until some external agent acts on them to cause the inward and external change which brings about the story's resolution. I'm probably quite keen on using love and sex and memory and romance and all that

kind of thing in my work, and the wild, mercurial, female character fits in with all of this very nicely.

It also has to be said that there are a fair number of these creatures in many kinds of fiction. I'm a big fan of the Hardy heroines such as Tess and Bathsheba, and Pasternak's Lara. In sf, I always admired the similar way Keith Roberts used to write about women in his best books such as *Pavane* and *The Inner Wheel*. A lot of other male sf writers used to treat their female characters like men with breasts, although I think that's changing and improving. I certainly hope it is. "Breathmoss," which is a long novella I've only just finished, was a more conscious attempt to write "feminist sf" – or, to be more precise, to emulate Ursula Le Guin. I doubt if it reads anything like her, but then, that's always the way; you set out to emulate something, fail, and create something else instead...

NG: Your two most recent award-nominated stories, "The Summer Isles" and "The Chop Girl," reveal a particular affinity in you for the World War II era. What draws you to that time so especially?

IRM: It just interests me, and always has. I've thus read and researched quite a lot about it, so I guess it's easier on a practical level to write about it, rather than ancient Egypt, say (although I've done that, as well). There may also be a parental influence here, as my mother and father both served in World War II, and met in the forces. So I wouldn't be here at all, if it wasn't for Adolf Hitler.

NG: Coming now to *The Great Wheel* in detail: here, as in various other stories, you express criticism of the European Union, of its heedless affluence and fastidious exclusivity. This is a rich vein for sf to explore, isn't it?

IRM: I think I tend to use Europe because I'm a European rather than because of any more subtle reasons. Maybe I'm a bit ahead of the field in thinking of us Brits as essentially European rather than British, but I regard myself as a product of European culture, so I use it as my main source of references.

NG: *The Great Wheel* is the story of a Catholic priest posted to an overcrowded North Africa, the milieu of The Endless City. Why did you choose a troubled religious conscience as your filter through which to observe this divided future world?

IRM: I quite fancied "doing" a priest as a main character. This proved a lot

harder than I imagined in the book's early drafts, though, mainly because I'm not remotely convinced by Roman Catholicism! So it became a sort of challenge, part of which involved understanding more properly what belief is really about. And then there was a fairly conscious Graham Greene influence from *The Power and the Glory*; priests and poverty do tend to go together rather well, don't they?

Religion and spirituality in the more general sense does interest me greatly. Although there are many obvious fine and honourable exceptions in sf, it's still not perhaps given as much general emphasis as it should – especially when you consider that sf writers are continually describing what are essentially miracles, and creating religions and cults to make their worlds seem real. Too often, still, this area tends to be a bit tokenist, largely because I suspect the writers themselves left organized religion behind a long time ago and have little time or patience for it. I'm not at all sure that religion will vanish in the future, despite the fact that I'm not conventionally religious myself, or be reduced to the primitive level of totems and caves in which it's often described. Whichever way the future goes, I think that humanity will face horrors and glories and revelations which will cause us to assess and reassess ourselves and our relationship to the world in much the same way that we always have. I also think that people like Hawking are wrong when they say that we will soon have the answers to pretty much everything. Eminent Victorians used to think much the same thing. Of course, we know a lot more of the *how* now, but still very little of the *why*. Even if we really are composed of vibrating multi-dimensional strings, that doesn't really help us to get to grips with the things which matter to us humans, does it? Modern Theories of Everything seem to open far more doors than they close.

As to writing *The Great Wheel* – to me, the strongest argument against a conventional Christian deity is the gulf between how much God's supposed to care about us and this world he supposedly created, and then the way the world actually is. This was something which, in the main character's own doubts and experiences, I set out to dramatize in the book. So, for me, writing about a priest was a technically difficult choice, but also a pretty obvious one.

NG: *The Great Wheel* has appeared only in the USA, and there only as a hardcover; yet it has to rank as a major sf novel. What is it about the sf market, would you say, that has led to this state of affairs? And is it the case that you have at least one other major

novel unpublished, a full-length version of your superb alternate-history novella "The Summer Isles"?

IRM: The sf market (as publishers and booksellers determine it) is in some ways quite narrow, and I'm not at all sure that my work fits very easily in with its expectations. I've noticed, for example, that, of the people I meet personally and who read bits of my work out of general curiosity, I often tend to get a puzzled response from the ones who read mainly "sf," and a more positive and understanding response from those who mainly read more "mainstream" or naturalistic fiction.

As I said earlier, in my own vision of an alternate literary 2001, this wouldn't be a problem. Good sf would be right there on the same shelves as Anne Tyler and Martin Amis and Roddy Doyle. But, as we're where we are, and although it does seem to me that a lot of readers drift away from sf for the very reason that they're looking for something with a bit more bite and realism, it has made my work harder to sell. America's a bigger mar-

ket, and for that reason alone a bit more tolerant. They also tend to treat "genres" with much more respect over there. Just try reading a review of the latest Steven King in *Newsweek* (where he's treated like the major chronicler of US culture he so plainly is) – and then try even finding any review at all of his book in the high-brow British publications!

Yes, *The Summer Isles* is a novel; the novella which did so well and won the World Fantasy Award is only an abridgement. I must say that I was a bit disappointed – surprised, even – when British publishers (after all the usual umming and erring) weren't prepared to take on a book which I knew to be good, and was so essentially about living in this country. But then you get knocks in all kinds of work, and writing certainly isn't any different.

NG: What projects lie ahead of you? You've mentioned the possibility of expanding "Breathmoss," your fine new novella of far-future feminist Islam, into a novel...

IRM: Well, I've mentioned the Victorian alternate fantasy, *The Light Ages*, which should turn out to be quite a big novel when it's done, although more Charles Dickens than Tolkien.

Otherwise, and currently riding the fast steam, I have a novel about wormholes into an alternate universe set about 80 years from now, which may or may not end up being called *Mouth Music*. It's set in a hot Scotland, and a very cold Somewhere Else, and I've had to do quite a lot of Proper Research to make the science bit work for me.

I've found these days that working on a few things helps to keep me fresh, so you're right to also mention "Breathmoss," which is just finished as a long novella. My new story "Isabel of the Fall," which is included here in *Interzone*, is also set in the same universe, which I guess I should start calling the Ten Thousand and One Worlds or something. Together, these pieces represent an attempt by me to create a universe wherein I can populate a few more tales, and should also fan out into a novel if all goes well. For a long time, I've been looking for a way of writing about the far future which would both be wondrous enough to be interesting, and yet sufficiently grounded in here and now to make sense to us 21st-century Earthlings. As I mentioned, I sort-of had *The Left Hand of Darkness* in the back of my mind, but if you think Arabian Nights meets quantum physics with an Islamic feminist agenda and a touch of Gene Wolfe, you won't be far wrong. All sounds pretty straightforward so far, doesn't it?

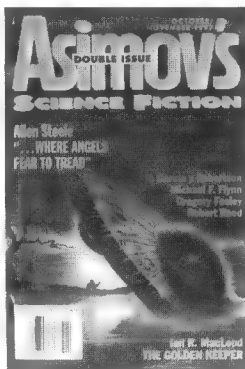
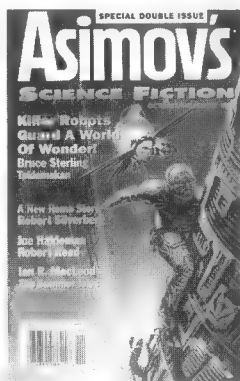


Ian MacLeod at the time his first story appeared in *Interzone* in 1989

Ian R(oderick) MacLeod (1956-)

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The Salt Box

Gwyneth Jones

The Christmas that she was nine years old, Fiorinda's gran gave her a strange Christmas present. It was a box, of plain, polished birch. It had a snug-fitting lid, which opened to show a space inside about as big as a turkish coffee cup, lined in darker apple-wood and full of sparkling white grains. Gran handed this over, unwrapped, when Fiorinda brought her breakfast tray down to the basement on Christmas morning. Gran was not bedridden, but she liked to spend much of her time under the covers, tucked up like a nesting animal.

"Is it drugs?" asked the little girl.

"No! It's salt. Taste, go on, try some. And look here."

Gran turned the box over, and twisted off the base to reveal another cavity, containing a soft mass like yellowish cotton wool, and things that looked to the child vaguely like the dismantled workings of a mousetrap. "That's so you can strike a light without matches."

"Is it magic?"

The old lady chuckled evasively. "Why would I waste magic on *you*, you little heathen?"

Gran was a witch, a Wiccan. Her damp rooms in the basement of Fiorinda's mother's house were hung with magical things: glitter balls, crystals, plastic dolls, sequined scarves, bunches of herbs. People came to her for spells or to have their fortunes told – discreetly using the garden door, so they didn't have to meet Fiorinda's Mum. The child viewed her grandmother's profession with indifference. Already, Fiorinda didn't believe in anything.

"Is it old?"

"No, it's new. I had someone make it for you, one of my associates. It's for your future. You must take it with you, when you set out to seek your fortune." She closed the child's hands over the box, covering them with her own. "You are the salt of

the earth, that's what you are. I've seen it. And the world will love you as meat loves salt. Now put it away, Frances dear, and don't let your mother know."

The child was used to being told, by her gran, that she mustn't let her mother know. Most of gran's secrets were pointless: either things Mum knew about already (like gin and sherry taken from Mum's sideboard, like probably-stolen goods accepted in barter for magical services); or things she wouldn't care about, like spells that didn't work, or scraps of highly flavoured gossip. The salt box seemed different. She hid it carefully. In time she would come to see it as a double symbol, a threat and a promise. The promise was that she would escape: that winds of change would blow away the chill, hateful tedium of her childhood. The threat was that she would never free herself from an embarrassing set of old fashioned values. She would be in the new age but not of it.

When she was eleven her periods began, and she decided to call herself Fiorinda. This was the year in which her mother was operated on for breast cancer. It was while Mum was in hospital that Fiorinda's aunt Carly turned up. Fiorinda had a step-father, her mother's ex-husband. She had two grown-up half-sisters and a

half-brother, and there was gran of course. But she'd never known that her mother had a sister until Carly appeared on the doorstep, with a taxi driver carrying her suitcases. She looked young, incredibly much younger than Mum, and she was dressed in the height of fashion. She moved in and switched on the central heating, although it was only November. She brought with her a regime of hot showers, scented foam, music videos and channel hopping, takeaway food and glossy magazines. Gran stayed in the basement. She didn't seem to like her younger daughter much. Probably she was thinking of how angry Mum would be when she saw the bills for all this. But



Illustrations by Bryan Talbot

Fiorinda, who lived for the moment, was thrilled.

Carly explained that there had been a big family quarrel, years ago, and that was why she hadn't been in touch. She said she'd last visited this house for Fiorinda's third birthday party. "You don't remember, but I was here. You were a very bossy, precocious little girl, do you remember that? I gave you a pink wooden horse."

Fiorinda wished she could remember, or that any sign of the pink horse remained.

The cancer was defeated, at least temporarily. Mum came home from hospital. Once she came into the kitchen, (actually warm, under Carly's regime) and found Fiorinda resplendent in her aunt's expensive cosmetics. She stared for a moment, and Fio braced herself for the storm, but all Mum said was, "I'm going to turn the heating down." She left the room, without a glance at her sister: head lowered, arms wrapped around her changed and vulnerable body.

Carly was blushing, Fiorinda was surprised to see. "She thinks I'm a child stealer."

"Is that why she hates you?"

"No... It's because of things that happened long, long ago. Why don't you have lodgers, Fio? She can't maintain this place on her salary."

Fio's Mum was a university lecturer. "We did have lodgers. But they either didn't pay the rent; or they were junkies and trashed their rooms; or they had dogs that shitted everywhere; or they had babies that screamed. I don't think it would work, whoever they were. My mother hates people, any people."

"Poor Sue."

"What was she like? I mean, years ago?"

"She was a journalist. She was chic and sexy, she was demanding, she had tons of style –"

"I can't imagine it. What kind of journalist?"

"Mainly music... Rock music. Didn't you know? What does she teach, now?"

"Contemporary culture," said Fio, with a grimace: contemporary meant something for old people. "But what happened? Why did she give it all up?"

"She didn't give it up, it gave her up. She fell from grace, it happens. Sue took it hard."

"I can imagine *that*. Oh. I suppose that's why she hates me to play –"

"What –?"

Fiorinda was forced to play the piano. In secret she had taught herself to play acoustic guitar and to sing, a little (the secondhand guitar came from gran, and the basement black market). She wasn't ready to tell Carly about this. "Oh, you know: she hates any kind of music but Beethoven, that sort of thing." Until Carly came, Fiorinda's only access to non-classical music had been through her ancient radio alarm, on which she listened to chart shows, secretly, late at night.

Carly started putting the make-up away. The house had become cheerfully untidy under her rule, but she was careful about her own possessions: she left no hostages. "You can play Beethoven, wow. What a talented niece I have. But I'd have to introduce you as just a friend if you came to see me, because you look *so grown up*. You'd put

ten years on my age." She surveyed her handiwork. "You're prettier than Sue. You don't have ginger eyebrows. She *made* herself beautiful. You won't have to try."

Life in the cold house became doubly miserable through that long winter. Mum refused to accept Fiorinda's new name, which led to pointless friction. Every evening she sat marking papers at one end of the "dining table" that stood in the back of their chill living room, her profile sour in the lamplight. The idea of Fio having a telly of her own that she could use in another room was vetoed, no reason given. So she listened to books on tape, at the most muted volume because Mum hated headphone-leak. She never read *printed* books in Mum's presence, because it would have pleased her. Every time her mother called her "Frances" it was another flick on the raw. In the night she devoured her mother's library, relishing the privacy of the old relationship; and wrote songs, both words and music, which she hid inside the split in her mattress.

When Carly invited Fio to visit her, Mum tried to stop that too. Fio heard them arguing on the phone. (There was one, fixed phone in the cold house. It lived in the front hall, at the foot of the stairs, by the living room door, for maximum inconvenience and minimum privacy). "She's a *child*, Caz. She's a *little girl*. Leave her alone –" But Fio pleaded and Carly persisted and in the end Mum gave way. Fiorinda travelled on the Underground by herself (she had to do this anyway, to get to secondary school) into the centre of London. She ate in a restaurant for the first time in her life, she stayed the night at Carly's tiny flat in Kensington Church Street. Carly took her shopping, gave her clothes, makeup and a mobile phone. (The phone didn't work after the first day, but it looked great). True to her word, she introduced Fio to the people she met in Kensington as "the daughter of a friend of mine."

In the summer, Carly invited Fiorinda to stay for a whole week. This brought renewed resistance, but Carly wouldn't take no for an answer. "And when you're tired of this game," said Mum, "You'll dump the poor kid and I'll be left to pick up the pieces. That's what pisses me off." Fio, eavesdropping from the landing, heard the defeat in her mother's voice and exulted.

Mum would have been furious if she'd known that Carly let Fio smoke dope. But nothing else remotely shocking happened: no stronger drugs, no vice. People came around and chatted, Fio was mostly ignored. She spent much of her time on her visits to the first floor Kensington flat alone in the cubbyhole Carly called her study, drinking diet coke and playing computer games. She didn't mind. It was paradise compared to life at home. But this time Carly had been invited to a country house party, and she was going to take Fiorinda with her. They were going to stay with Rufus O'Niall, the rock star. Of course this had to be kept secret from Fio's mother.

Rufus O'Niall had been a megastar before Fiorinda was born. He was practically retired now, even from special guest stadium sort of occasions. She'd have been more excited if she'd been going to meet Glasswire, or Aoxomoxoa and the Heads.

"I wasn't invited," she said, uneasily. "Won't that be weird?"

"Rufus is a billionaire or something, darling. He doesn't count the spoons. And he's a very private person, but he never goes anywhere without this huge entourage –" Carly laughed. "Don't worry, you'll be lost in the crowd. But you'll meet people. You want to be a singer, don't you?" Fio had by now confessed her secret ambition. "You'll need contacts. You can't start too soon."

The journey and the arrival passed in a blur. Carly had been right, there was a crowd of people, the kind of people she had met in Kensington only more so. Fio was shown to a room by a servant. The house must be 500 years old – half timbered, spartan, smelling of beeswax and lavender and dried oranges. The portraits on the walls were not of Rufus O'Niall's forebears, obviously not, since his skin was chestnut brown, and the pictured faces were as white as Fiorinda's. But the sense of dynasty was right. Rufus was old money in the world of rock and roll. He and his band The Geese had reached that rare plateau of truly unassailable fame, and solid wealth. Fiorinda began to feel thrilled. Later, when he took some of his guests on a tour of the manor grounds, she tagged along and tried to get next to the master. What was most incredible, was that Carly's friendship with genuine celebrities seemed to prove that *Fio's Mum* had once been on intimate terms with the famous. But she'd been warned not to mention her mother. Whatever it was Mum had done, apparently it still rangled in the music world.

She was trying to be cool, but feeling very uncomfortable. Used to the modest habits of her North London, mainly Hindu, neighbourhood, she felt terribly exposed in the clothes she was wearing. She was glad Carly had warned her how to dress, but she kept wanting to put her hands over her bum, to fold her arms over the outline of her breasts. And the men were no better. She supposed that if you were rich, walking about in your own private grounds was the same as being out at a fancy club.

As they climbed a flight of steps, from the fishponds to a rose terrace, Rufus turned and glanced at Fio: who had managed to reach the centre of the group. He at once resumed his conversation with the fat, florid woman beside him (a movie producer). But a few moments later he turned again, and handed her a sprig of rose leaves. "Put that in your pocket, sweet-briar," he said, with a tender smile. "Keep it for a souvenir."

She hadn't known you could have rosebushes with scented leaves. She didn't have a pocket. She held the sprig in her hand, awkwardly, all the way back to the house. She was deeply flattered and excited. She started trying to think of the names of some of The Geese's hit singles, so that she'd

have something to say if he noticed her again.

In the evening, after dinner, some guests disappeared. The rest sat around with Rufus in the great hall. People had been drinking quite a lot, and sniffing coke, but they were quiet about it. Fio had half expected them to be naked except for jewels and make-up, after the way they dressed in daytime, but they were wearing the same as in the afternoon. Carly was there, but she seemed to have decided to leave Fiorinda to her own devices, which was fine. Fio did not want to be shown off, or looked after like a baby. She had changed into her best scarlet teeshirt and a shiny long pink skirt. The teeshirt was printed over with little naked male figures, labelled jokily things like "French Polish" and "Turkish Delight," though you couldn't see much difference between the faces; or the sets of wedding-tackle. She had tried it on in the exclusive shop where Carly bought it for her, baring her tiny budding breasts without shame: they could stand up for themselves. "Well," the attentive assistant had said, impressed. "I thought that colour wouldn't suit you, dear, but it certainly does."

Scarlet gave Fiorinda's creamy skin the pure glow of a candleflame, it made her strongly marked brows and lashes look made-up, which they were not... for some reason, Carly had forbidden her to wear make-up on this visit. There was talk, and silence; someone strummed a guitar. It was oddly like an evening in the cold house, except that the setting was ancient instead of merely old fashioned, and there were more people. Fio felt ignored. She went over to the hearth, where there was a fire of cherry logs because the June night was chill. She gazed into the flames and then sat down, as if by chance, with her back against the couch where he was sitting, the rock-lord in state surrounded by his courtiers. She hoped that she would think of something intelligent to say: somehow contribute to the conversation and get noticed. Instead, Rufus began to stroke her hair. She felt his fingertips on the nape of her neck, and then circling her ear.

She was half stunned at the liberty he was taking. How did he know that he *could do this*? How could he just *stroke* her, as if she was a cat or a dog? But of course he could do what he liked. For Rufus O'Niall, everything was allowed.

"Can you do magic?" he murmured, so that only she could hear. "You look as if you could."

"My gran's a witch. Not me. I think it's a recessive gene. You need two copies."

Rufus laughed very quietly, like a rumble of soft thunder.

"What about your parents?"

"Oh, they're dead. My gran looks after me." Dead parents were simpler.

Someone challenged him to a game of chess, and he left the



couch.

Fiorinda's room was next to Carly's. When Rufus came to find her in the night she was sitting by the bed, still wearing her scarlet teeshirt and her pink skirt. She hadn't wanted to take them off. She'd have felt stupid waiting in her pyjamas, especially since she was half convinced that she was imagining the whole thing. But here he was. Rufus said, "I thought you'd be tucked up under the covers by now, sweet-briar." He took her in his arms and carried her off to his own room: which was sumptuous, but she didn't get a chance to take much in.

In the morning she woke in her own bed with no clear idea of how she'd got there. Carly was shaking her gently. "I've got to go back to London," she announced. "Right now. I'm sorry sweetheart. Something desperately important's come up, it means lots of money."

Fio was hazy about how her aunt made a living, but she nodded.

"You'll be all right, won't you darling? I'd hate to drag you away. You know Joel, and Mittie." These were Carey's neighbours, a gay couple who lived in the flat upstairs. "They'll look after you, and bring you home tomorrow, or Monday."

Fiorinda had been told by her school friends that she would never get a husband, because her Mum was a depressive and had had breast cancer. In the comfortable bourgeois community that surrounded her mother's house, it was taken for granted that people with bad genes would not reproduce themselves. (It was easier for the community to accept this idea, since it was equally taken for granted that bad genes were almost unknown in people of Indian ancestry). The well-to-do Hindu girls weren't being cruel. They meant that she should prepare herself for another kind of life, and they were concerned that she showed no sign of doing so. Fiorinda didn't mind. She liked the feeling of being one of a kind. She liked the feeling that she had nothing to lose. She'd been very surprised at what had happened, but she'd had no qualms about losing her virginity. It might be a big break, and anyway it was worth a shot.

In the entertainment business, most people have to start out working for free.

She went back to London with Carly's friends, but she knew it wasn't over. Sure enough, about two weeks after half term, Rufus came to find her. He was waiting in a taxi one afternoon, discreetly parked down the road from the school gates. He took her to a flat, a luxurious but poky little place which he used "sometimes—" he explained vaguely. She knew he'd used it with other girls: she didn't mind. It was the start of a regular affair. Sometimes he was waiting in the morning, waylaid her and carried her off, and she never reached her classes: sometimes he only "borrowed her" as he put it, for an hour or so. He gave her presents, which had to stay in the flat as she couldn't take them home, but there was never any suggestion that he would offer her money. She felt that was a good sign. The rewards she'd get for this would be of a different order. Weeks passed. In August, Mum thought Fiorinda was going into school to the holiday-homework club; but she was meeting Rufus. She found that he would talk to her, and plagued him with her insatiable, devouring curiosity. He said she asked more questions than a three-year-old. The sexual part of the experience wasn't very sexy for Fio: but she didn't mind that. The strange and important thing was that she was

actually getting to know him, getting to *know* this big, flamboyantly handsome grown up man as a person. Rufus was lagging behind her, but that would change. He would come to recognize Fio as a person, instead of a forbidden pleasure. He would like her, instead of feeling addicted and guilty the way he felt now. She began to think with impatience of the years – at least three years, to be reasonable – that must pass before they could be seen in public together.

Then in September, without warning, he vanished.

She didn't know the address of their flat. When he stopped coming to pick her up she took the Tube to the approximate location and walked around trying to find it; but she couldn't. She realized, then, why she'd paid no attention to details like street names. She must have known, though her daydreams had seemed so real, that this was how it would end. He



would simply be gone.

Since the country house party she had hardly heard from her aunt Carly. She guessed that Carly had found out about her going with Rufus, and naturally didn't want to get involved. But she had nowhere else to turn so she went to Kensington Church Street. She still had her entry card for the front door, but when she got upstairs there was nobody in. When she'd been knocking and ringing at her aunt's door for a while Joel came down from the floor above.

"Hi, Fio. Long time no see. Carly's gone away for a few days. Can I help?"

"It's private." But though she knew she *could not* chase Rufus, she was too weak to resist this opportunity. "I don't suppose you know how I can contact Rufus O'Niall?"

Joel had a key to Carly's front door. He opened it and hustled her inside, into Carly's tiny, smartly furnished living room. "Rufus has left town," he said, folding his arms and glaring at her. "He suddenly rushed back to the Seychelles, which is where he more or less lives these days. With his lovely wife and kids. You don't want to contact him. How old are you?"

She bristled. "D'you think I'm too young to have sex?"

"With someone your own age, maybe that would be different. Rufus O'Niall is a low down dirty dog. He's old enough to be your granddad, and *you* are well young enough to get him arrested, except that it won't happen. Maybe he actually took pity on you, kid: he can't have fled the country for fear of discovery. His sad taste for under-age totty is something everyone knows and nobody tells... Do you hear what I'm saying? You have nothing on him. Go home, don't come here again. You do have a home?"

"Yes."

"Thank God for that. How did you get involved with Carly Slater, anyway?"

"She's actually my aunt," quavered Fiorinda, frightened by his anger.

Joel frowned. "Your *aunt*?"

"Yes!" Fiorinda had been forbidden to mention this, but she was stung by the term "under-age totty." "She's my aunt. Her mother is my gran and lives in our basement."

He stared for a moment, in silence. "Remind me, what's your name? Your real name."

She was so intimidated she confessed the hated truth. "Frances. It's Frances Day. But that's my mother's ex-husband's name: she uses it but he's not my father. My real name is Frances Slater. Carly is my mother's sister."

"So, that makes you... your mother must be... Sue Slater? The journalist?"

"Yes."

"Oh my God." Joel came up

close and looked into Fio's face intently. He backed away again, looking stunned. "Wow. Your aunt is really something."

Fiorinda wondered what was going on. Probably he'd guessed why she was here. But though she knew she'd been stupid, her problem wasn't *that* weird.

"Why did you want to see her? Did you think she'd give you Rufus's private number? Because you can forget that –"

"No! I don't want him involved! Not really, not at all. But I need help. I think I'm pregnant."

"My God," said Joel. "What a mess."

The sisters had a confrontation, in the kitchen where Carly had one day painted Fio's face, and remarked, "I'd have to introduce you as just a friend." Naturally, Carly denied everything. She insisted she'd been trying to help, trying to give poor Fiorinda a life. She was as appalled as anyone at the way Rufus had behaved, she'd had no idea he would do that, she was devastated, it was awful, a really horrible coincidence, she felt terribly responsible... But before the denials started, Fiorinda, who was present at this meeting, had seen the gleam of triumph in her aunt's eyes. She wondered what her Mum had done to Carly, in the long ago, to lay the fuse for such a savage, cold-blooded, long-planned revenge. But she wasn't curious about the details. She decided, then and there, never to see her half-siblings again: never to have anything more to do with them.

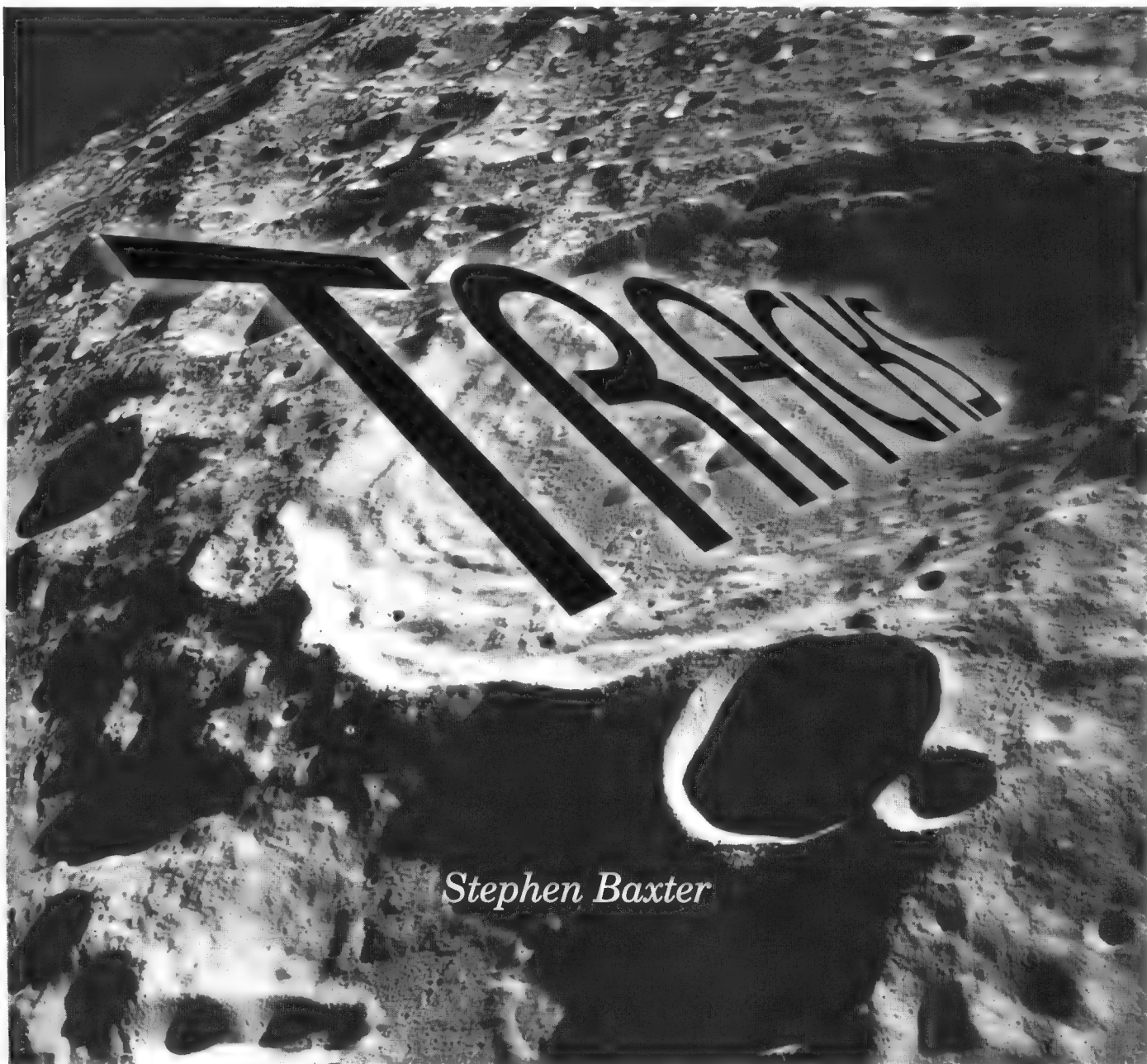
If this was family life, the hell with it.

She refused to have an abortion. Having an abortion would make it all too real. Her gran provided cantrips and potions that didn't work, her mother seemed too sunk in her own despair to take much notice. She stopped going to school in the fifth month and completed the pregnancy

in deep denial, trying to stay thin and hoping to the last minute that it was all a bad dream. The baby was born surprisingly strong and healthy. When it was three months old it caught pneumonia and died, after which Fiorinda left the cold house forever.



Gwyneth Jones's last story in *Interzone* was "La Cenerentola" (issue 136). The above piece, although not in itself sf or fantasy, was written as an overture for her new novel *Bold as Love* (Gollancz, August 2001, illustrated by Bryan Talbot), which she describes as "a fantasy about a rock-and-roll revolution, set in a near-future England. 'The Salt Box' is the childhood story of Fiorinda, the 16-year-old babystar who gets caught up in this revolution, and tells how she met her father, the legendary Rufus O'Niall." See Gwyneth's special website: <http://www.boldaslove.co.uk>



Stephen Baxter

Well, the Moon was a pretty exciting place to be, I can tell you that. Even if we hadn't found alien beings.

It was as we drove out at the start of our second EVA – our second day on the Moon, the second of our three – that we found the tracks. I know what you're thinking. *What tracks?* There was no report of tracks in our TV transmission, or our radio transmission, or in the debriefing, or the still photographs. Nevertheless, they were there.

Peter, I know there's a kind of a stigma that hung over your father, for the rest of his life, after that mission. You don't have to deny it. A sense of failure, right? A sense that he was a little reckless with that jump you've seen so many times on video, that fall that smashed up his backpack, the way we had to limp back to the LM and come hurrying home with half our objectives lost, a 20-million-buck mission screwed up by one guy fooling around on the Moon.

Well, I can tell you it wasn't like that – not like that at

all. But it's something only your father and I knew, up to now. Today, now that old Joe is going to his grave, I want you to know the truth. And I want you to think about it, when you see that old Missing Man up in the sky this afternoon.

If you want to know where we were, look up at a new Moon, and look for the chin of the Man, the highland area there. You might see a dimple, a bright pinpoint; I'm told some kids can see it with the naked eye. That's Tycho Crater. A hole in the ground 50 miles across, big enough to swallow LA.

And that's where we walked, in 1973.

The sky's black, you know, but the ground is brightly lit, as if lit by floodlights on the floor of some huge theatre. A theatre stage, yeah. You lope across the surface, in the light of that big white spotlight that's the Sun. And with every step you kick up the dust from under your feet, and it goes flying out in straight lines, just glim-

mering once in the flat sunlight, before falling back.

It was our second day. Our first day had been good, full of solid work. But morning is a week long, on the Moon. So I knew I had another bright morning, here on the Moon, stretching ahead of me.

And today we were going climbing, up into the foothills of Tycho's central peak. I whistled as I went to work.

The Lunar Rover, yeah. Now that car was one terrific toy. It comes to the Moon folded up like a concertina against the side of the LM. To deploy it you pull on a pair of lanyards, and the chassis lowers slowly, like pulling down a drawbridge. Then, suddenly, wire mesh wheels pop out from the four corners, complete with orange fenders.

It worked just fine. We loaded up with our tools and our sample bags and what-not, and off we set, two good old boys at home on the Moon. Joe – as commander, he was the driver – kept complaining about the lack of front-wheel steering, which for some reason wouldn't work, so he had to rely on the rear steering. I was just thrown around, especially when Joe took a swerve. The ground was nothing but bumps and hollows, an artillery field, and every time we hit an obstacle one or two wheels would come looming off of the ground, throwing up huge rooster tails of black dust behind them.

It would have looked strange if there had been anyone around to see it, as we bounced our way over the surface of the Moon. The Rover is just a frame, with its wire wheels and fold-up seats and clusters of antennae and tool racks, and there's the two of us, outsize in our shining white Moon suits, like two dough boys riding a construction-kit car.

It was tough work driving directly away from the Sun. The shadows, even of the smallest fragments of regolith, were hidden, and the light just glared back like off a snow field. But if you looked away from the Sun, you looked into shades of grey, darker and darker. And that was pretty much all the colours there were on the Moon, except for what we brought with us, and what we left at home. Black sky, grey soil, blue Earth.

I remember I was talking nine to the dozen about the geology, as we bounced along. I was trying to describe it for the guys in the back rooms, back in Houston. You never knew when some observation of yours was going to provide the key to understanding.

But Joe was somewhat graver. He always was. Your father was a good five years older than me, remember, and he'd been to the Moon once already, on an orbital LM test flight, while I was a rookie; and I guess he just let me chatter.

We got to the foothills and started to drive uphill. That Rover seemed to carry us without effort even under pretty steep hills. But I felt like I was about to slip out the back the whole time. And when we stopped, and I tried to get up, I could barely raise my suited body out of the seat. We were concerned that the Rover would run downhill, and in fact I could see one of its wheels was lifting off the surface. I just grabbed onto the Rover; it was so light I felt I could support it easily. We found an eroded old crater to park in, and when Joe drove it forward, there we were.

Well, we found the big 200-yard crater that was our main sampling objective. We climbed up towards the rim. It was like walking over a sand dune. In that old suit it felt as if I was inside an inflated tyre. But the footing under my feet got firmer, slowly.

As I approached the crater rim I began to walk into a litter of rocks. They must have been dug out of the crater by the impact that formed it, and they had rained down here like artillery shells. But that was long ago. Now the rocks' exposed faces were eroded, all but smoothed back into the surface from which they'd been dug out.

And so I climbed, chattering about the geology the whole way.

When I got to the crater itself I found it was maybe 30 yards deep, strewn with blocks ranging from a yard across to maybe 15 yards. I turned around. A few yards away I could see Joe, working through his checklist. His white suit glowed in the sunlight, except for his lower legs and boots, which looked as if they had been dragged through a coal scuttle. He moved stiffly, scarcely bending from the waist, and when he moved he tipped forward, like a leaning statue. But he was just bouncing over the Moon, whistling, glowing in the light. We were happy up there. That's how I'll remember him, you know. Glowing on the Moon.

Anyhow, it was at that moment, at the rim of that crater, that I saw the tracks.

Rover tracks.

I took a couple of seconds to get my breath, to think about it.

Three hundred feet high, I was looking down at the mountain's broad flank. It merged with a bright, undulating dust plain that swept away, just a sculpture of craters: craters on craters, young and sharp and cup-shaped overlying old and eroded and subtle. Beyond that I could see mountains thrusting up into space. All of this was diamond sharp, under a black sky. And out there in the middle of it all was a single human artefact: our lander, a gleaming metal speck.

Well, I looked for the tracks again. They were still there. They were still Rover tracks.

At first I thought they must be ours. I mean, whose else could they be? But I could see *our* tracks; they snaked back over the plain to the lander. *These* went west-east. In fact you could tell by the tread marks that the vehicle that had made these tracks was going to the east.

I kind of shivered.

I called to Joe. At first he didn't believe me. I think he figured I might be in some kind of trouble, my suit overheating or some such. Anyhow, there were the tracks, large as life. And they still weren't ours.

Through all this, we hadn't said a word, and we were out of sight of the Rover's TV camera. I remember we flipped up our gold sun-visors and we just looked each other, and we came to a silent decision.

We clambered down to the Rover. We told the Mission Control guy in charge of the camera where to point, and we told them to look for themselves. There they were, tracks on the Moon, made by a Lunar Rover that sure

wasn't ours. You could see them crystal clear in the TV images. I tell you, it was a relief to find that they saw them too, back in Mission Control.

Well, they debated for a time what to do, and we sat there and waited.

... If I looked at the ground, pocked and battered as it was, things didn't seem so strange. If you've ever seen a freshly ploughed field, harrowed and very fine, and you know when it rains on it, it gives you that sort of pimply look – that's what I called it, I called it a freshly ploughed field. It was dry as toast but it still had that appearance. Mundane, as you might say.

But whenever I looked up, there was the black sky above this glowing ground, and there was Earth, a brilliant blue crescent, a sight utterly unlike anything seen from the ground. It was electrifying, in moments, this realization of how far I'd come, of *where I was*.

I remember thinking that just being up there, driving a car on the Moon, would be strangeness enough for one lifetime, without *this*.

You might not believe it now, but some of the scientists wanted us to just ignore this wacko stuff and carry on with our timelined work. I felt a little of that anxiety too. We'd been rehearsing the science objectives for two years already, and we only had a few hours, and we might waste the whole damn thing if we followed some chimera, up here on the Moon. For example, maybe those tracks could have been made by a boulder that rolled down hill after a landslide. I mean, you could *see* that wasn't so, but it was possible, I guess.

In the end, after maybe ten minutes, we got the order to go ahead and, well, to follow those tracks. And I remember how my heart thumped as we loaded up the Rover again, and turned right, to the east, and set off in a big flurry of black dirt.

Another rockin' and rollin' ride: grey surface as wavy as an ocean surface, black sky, blue Earth. We didn't say much, on the way, following those crisp tracks. What was there to say?

I remember what I was thinking, though.

I'd always been fascinated by the notion of alien life. Well, I was in the space programme. It was a disappointment to me that by the time my mission rolled around – long before humans ever got there, I guess, in fact – it was clear to everybody that the Moon was dry as dust, and dead besides. We were going to the Moon for geology, not biology.

So I was getting pretty excited as we bounced along, following those tracks. Was it possible that we were in some kind of *2001* situation here, that we were after all going to find some kind of alien marker on the Moon, that those tracks we followed had been planted to lead us right there?

That isn't quite what we found.

Towards the eastern end of the valley, as we come over a ridge, there's this car. Immediately I can see it looks very similar to the Lunar Rover, and there are two figures in it. They didn't seem to be moving. We stopped, maybe a half mile away, and just stared. I don't know

what I was expecting – a monolith? Bug-eyed green guys? – but not *that*.

So we radioed Houston that we'd found this car, and we start to describe it. And they're mystified, but they start to get excited, we're excited. So we drove up to the other car, parked right alongside, and I got out and turned the TV on. I remember I wiped the lens clean of dust before I took the time to do anything else, but my heart was thumping like a jackhammer; the surgeons must have known, but it wasn't the time to raise an issue like that.

The occupants of the other car, two astronauts just like Joe and me, just sat there, not moving.

Anyhow I ran over to the passenger side, and Joe went to the driver's side. We just stood there, because by now we could see the two of them up close, and – you guessed it – the passenger's suit had my name sewn on it, and the other guy's had Joe's.

And then my heart was pumping harder, because I reached over and pulled up the gold sun visor, and I was looking at myself.

What can you say about an experience like that? It was unreal. In those heavy pressure suits, you're cut off anyhow. You can't see too well because of the curving glass all around your head, and you can't feel the texture of things because of your gloves. And there I was, looking out like a goldfish staring out of his bowl, staring at my own face.

But it wasn't like a nightmare – it wasn't like I was dead – whoever it was looked like me but it *wasn't* me. And, of course, the other fellow looked like Joe.

And now I got the shock of shocks, because my guy, the copy of *me*, turns his head, inside his helmet, and opens his eyes, and looks straight at me.

Well, he looked terrible, as if he'd been sitting there some time, but he was obviously alive. He mouthed, but I couldn't hear what he was saying.

So again we debated what to do, with each other, with Houston.

We didn't know who these guys were, of course, or how they got there, or any of it. But here they were, obviously in trouble, and nobody else to help them but us.

So we helped them.

I took the other me, and Joe took his twin. You can just lift up a person, up there on the Moon, with a little effort. The other me moved like a big stiff balloon, and I plumped him down, upright in the dust. Then I hooked up the hoses from my backpack to his. It was an emergency procedure we'd rehearsed any number of times, in case one of our backpacks failed. And meanwhile Joe hooked up himself to his copy. Then I pulled my twin's arm over my shoulder, and Joe did likewise, and we started to bounce our way down the hill and back to our LM.

We considered taking the Rovers, but it wouldn't have been an easy drive for either of us – even supposing the "other" Rover had worked at all. And we would have been separated, too far apart to help each other. We just decided to get back home as soon as we could.

Not that it was too clear to me what we'd do when we

got there. That old LM wasn't exactly a field hospital. But we could have brought the two guys home, I guess; the LM was designed to carry a couple of hundred pounds of Moonrock off the surface, and we could have crammed two extra guys into the Command Module, the ferry that was waiting in orbit to bring us home.

I guess.

The truth is we didn't think that far ahead. We just had to help those guys. What else were we going to do?

I do remember looking back at the Rover, though – *our* Rover – and looking at all the rocks we'd already collected, that now we wouldn't be able to bring on home. We were bringing back something unutterably strange, but we wouldn't be able to complete our mission.

It took us an hour to make it back to the LM. The surgeons insisted we stop for breaks along the way, letting ourselves cool down, sipping water out of the mouthpieces in our helmets. And so on.

It was hard work. I spent most of it staring down at my footing. The dust was like powdered charcoal. The surface was like walking on crisp, frozen snow, or maybe on a cinder track. I remember thinking that whatever came out of this, these would be the last steps I'd take on the Moon.

Well, we got back to Tycho Base, our landing site. And that was when we got our next shock.

Because the LM had gone.

At least, the ascent stage had, the cabin that would have carried us back to orbit. Only the truncated base remained. Neither of us spoke, if I recall, and nor did the capcom. What could you say? Without that LM we weren't going home.

I remember limping around that site, still supporting my copy, just looking. I could see Rover tracks and footprints converging on the truncated base of the Lunar Module. The LM itself was the centre of a circle of scuffed regolith, littered with gear, two thrown-out backpacks, urine bags and food packs, lithium hydroxide canisters and LM armrests, the detritus of three days of exploration, all of it just thrown out at the end of the stay, as we would have done. Somebody here had been and gone before us.

The LM was surrounded by glittering fragments, for its foil insulation had been split and scattered by the blast of the departed ascent stage's engine. And there was a new ray system, streaks of dust which overlaid the footprints. But the gold insulation on the descent stage was discoloured, and in some places it had split open and peeled back. Joe tried to smooth it back with his gloved hand, but it just crumbled under his touch. The bird was evidently thoroughly irradiated, and remarkably dusty. The paint had turned to tan, but it was uneven, and when you looked more closely I could see tiny micrometeorite pits, little craters dug into the paintwork.

That LM had suddenly gotten old.

I remember looking up, looking for the Earth. Well, that was still there. And I saw a single, glittering star in the blackness, far above my head. It was the Command Module, in its two-hour lunar orbit, waiting to carry us

home. Except we couldn't reach it, without a LM.

I wasn't afraid. It was all too strange.

... And then I heard our capcom yammering in my ear, telling me the surgeons were very concerned, I had to quit goofing off and get Joe into the LM.

Joe?

Well, I looked around. And I found I wasn't propping up some ghostly shadow of myself, but old Joe. Our two copies had gone, as if they'd never been, and it was Joe's backpack I was hooked up to. And when I turned again, there was the LM, intact once more, gold and silver and black, gleaming and glistening, good as new.

I looked at Joe, and Joe looked at me, and we didn't say a word.

I guess you know the rest of the story.

As far as the world was concerned, Joe had taken a pratfall doing a dumb stunt, seeing how high he could jump in the one-sixth gravity, and snafued his suit, and I'd had to rescue him, walk him back to the LM on my backpack. That was what everybody else remembered; it's what the video records and even our voice transcripts show. I've seen the images myself. He falls with a dreamy slowness, like falling underwater. He has time to twist around, the stiff suit making him move as a unit, like a statue.

Except it didn't happen that way. That's just the way reality knit itself back together around us. You see?

Well, we didn't argue. We managed to get back into the LM, pressure up, and we prepared for an emergency launch.

We had time to think about it, in the three days it took to get back to Earth, and afterwards, in the long debriefings and all the rest.

I'll tell you what I concluded – though I don't think Joe ever agreed with me.

We're in some sort of Quarantine.

The early Moonwalkers were put in quarantine when they got back to Earth, just to be sure there were no bugs to hurt us here on Earth. So maybe we're seen as infectious, or even dangerous, like in that movie with the big robot – what was it called?

But it might be benevolent. Think about it. Maybe They cherish us. Maybe They cherish our art and religion and literature and stuff, and don't want to swamp us with their giant galactic civilization until we're ready. Maybe They are even protecting us from the real bad guys.

So They just hide it all. We're in some kind of shell. What we see around us isn't completely real; "reality" is doctored, a little or a lot, as if we're in some giant Program, a virtual reality as you'd call it today, showing us what's best for us to see. But beyond the painted walls of our fake sky, the glittering lights of the interstellar cities light up the dark.

Walking on the Moon, we walked into a glitch in the Program. That was all.

That all seemed plausible to me, even back then. We didn't know about virtual reality. Believe me, though, we had computer glitches. At least it was a rational explanation.

What Joe believed, in the end, he never told me. He knew he could never tell the truth – as I couldn't – even though the subtle blaming for a screwed mission began even before we hit the Pacific. Even though old Joe came back carrying the can for a snafu, even though his pride hurt more than he could say, he kept his peace.

And now he's taken his secret with him.

There was one more thing, Peter. I never discussed this, even with Joe.

On the way back I participated in a spacewalk between Earth and Moon. I wasn't fully outside. My job was to be a lifeguard if you will. I was to monitor our Command Module Pilot's actions as he collected data cartridges from the outer hull, and I held his lifeline, his tether which controlled communications and oxygen and restraint. I was to haul him back if he got into trouble.

So Ben floats out, starts hand over hand back to the Service Module. The Earth's off to the right, probably about a two o'clock low, just a little thin sliver of blue and white. And then I spin around, and there's this enormous full Moon, and it was – I mean it was overwhelming, that kind of feeling. And you could see Tycho, you could see Tranquillity, all the major features, and it just felt you could reach out and touch 'em. No sensation of motion at all. And everywhere else you looked was just black.

About 15 minutes into this, with Ben doing his work nice and easy, I glanced at the Earth. And I saw ships in orbit.

Not little tin cans like ours. Giant golden ships. I had no sense of threat at all. Just watchfulness.

Next time I looked, those ships had gone, and there was the Earth, just a beautiful blue crescent, the loveliest thing.

It wasn't meant to happen, you see. It was just a glitch in the Quarantine Program. A bug. They just weren't ready for us to fly to the Moon so soon. They hadn't ordered the virtual-reality upgrades from Central Supplies in Andromeda, wherever. We just pushed it too far, and we got ourselves mixed up with other copies, or echoes, of ourselves. We crossed tracks, for a few hours.

But it turned into a test for us, for how we'd react to such strangeness. A test I liked to think we passed. I think that's why They showed Themselves to me.

Enough. Peter, I should let you go to your family. You decide what to do with what I told you. I just wanted you to know.

Wait until you see the Missing Man. Look out for the way that wing man peels off. I asked for him. Good pilot. Not so good as your father.

Stephen Baxter, who needs no introduction here, tells us that the above story "is based on an interview I did with Apollo astronaut Charlie Duke a couple of years ago. Before going to the moon Duke had a vivid dream about finding a copy of himself up there, much as I've set it out here. The story came from my figuring out how the dream could be rationalized, and is largely based on Duke's experiences."

HEAD SHOTS

short stories by
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It's not easy being action-movie offspring. Photographic evidence still survives to declare that your parents were thought cool once, though admittedly in a less cool time, but now they're just your parents, and frankly it's hard to see what anyone might once have thought interesting about their characters. Once you could light a Camel off the sexual crackle between them; now they just nuzzle queasily at the breakfast table and put you off your muffins. They tell you you're smarter and stronger, so how come you're so much lower in the credits? All your peers are off having the time of their lives bitparting at Hogwarts for DreamWorks, and you're stuck in the back seat of this lumbering recreation vehicle with the locks down: just an eight-year-old geek with no visible friends. Some holiday.

Nevertheless, *The Mummy Returns* with blond tyke in tow, for what appear to be no better than demographic reasons. It's not that the kid is any worse than anything else in this vast and trackless desert of ideas; Steven Sommers was for years an able and well-regarded kids' director before his dramatic mid-life conversion to witty, high-value genre spectacles in *Deep Rising* and the first reincarnate *Mummy*, and he wrangles young Freddie Boath's "Alex" (hm) well enough. Nonetheless, the kid is a living emblem of the state of sequelhood. The one character not to be somebody else's reincarnation, he pays for it by spending the movie being bundled around from scene to scene by stop-at-nothing producers racing to resurrect their former franchise and complete the big effects finale before the deadline runs out and the sun strikes their pyramid.

The new *Mummies* have certainly

struck a lode with this reincarnation thing. In the new Hollywood Egypt, there are no new ideas, just old ones rehashed. The nature of history is that *everything's* a sequel, and everyone can come back as many times as the audience's and the actors' patience will bear. Any time you need to add new characters or spin off a sub-franchise, just tack on a prologue or activate a flashback and a whole epic backstory will come flooding into view, complete with buried city of swivelling slabs and self-activating set pieces, all rising out of the dunes in perfect working condition. So long as you keep making it bigger each time, the machinery will carry on working forever, with no need to top up the tank

The Mummy Returns:

Above: Imhotep commands a quartet of soldier mummies. Below: Rick (Brendan Fraser) and Evelyn O'Connell (Rachel Weisz) brace themselves for trouble.



with the blood of fresh young ideas ever again.

The one glimmer of redemption from this cycle of endless, witless resurrections is the problem of visual overspend, for if nothing else *The Mummy Returns* is a state-of-the-art showcase for the limitations of digital effects. No opportunity has been lost to fill the screen with overambitious CG hordes: swarming scarabs, plagues of locusts, pygmy mummies, and an interminable succession of digital legions spilling over the dunes. Some look ok, but many don't, and there's an overwhelming cumulative conviction that more of more is less of anything. In particular, the long-trailed final-reel appearance of new franchisee The Scorpion King is probably the least convincing CG behemoth since the dawn of the art, and it's all too clear the shop has worked up to the wire in a doomed struggle to try and get their creation's face and torso looking like something more realistic than a Poser model of a celebrity wrestler. Still, this is the hacking edge of digital cinema in its purest sense, of moviemaking by numbers; and nobody could accuse *The Mummy Returns* of reluctance to plot by very big numbers indeed, in what is essentially a very extended game of wandering round tunnels solving puzzles that open doors to set pieces – with our heroes racing Imhotep's rascally gang to follow the clues on the video bracelet to the secret oasis to resurrect the Scorpion King, purely in order to kill him with the McGuffin of Osiris so as to command his army of the apocalypse and save/destroy the world (delete to choice).

As a sequel, it does fill some gaps in and around its forerunner (notably Evelyn's unexplained Egyptian flash-



Spy Kids: Carla Gugino and Antonio Banderas with Daryl Sabara (front left) and Alexa Vega

backs), and it's undeniably pleasing to the eye to have more of Oded Fehr and Patricia Velasquez, beautiful creatures both. But most of the old cast seem to be having a thoroughly miserable time. Rachel Weisz, who wrung real comic bravura from her original bluestocking character, is particularly misreincarnated here in a seemingly unrelated role as eyeliner-abusing action mum, while poor Brendan Fraser's Rick, evidently felt insufficiently planklike in the original, has been further sanded down till you can see the light through the veneer. Nor has Sommers's ear for dialogue tuned up any, with romantic badinage like "Have I kissed you today?", and young Alex apparently homeschooled not just in ancient Egyptian but in Americanisms from the future like "You're grounded!" and "Was not!/Was too!" The climax is quite well staged, as meaningless mechanical spectacle goes, but the poverty of imagination throughout is dispiriting – frankly disavowing any interest the franchise might once have feigned in the Karloff incarnation, or indeed in either archaeology or Egypt as anything other than design themes, and confirming the verdict of history that 1933 was a year in which nothing of note happened in Europe other than a double-decker bus chase round Bloomsbury.

And the historic lesson for young Alex? "You know," says Rick, "it's not easy being a dad." "Yeah, but you do it real good" (sic) – an exchange I doubt has ever been spoken in the real-world history of our species, so maybe after all there's something new under that parching desert sun.

Robert Rodriguez's dizzy, dazzling *Spy Kids* is much more direct and thoughtful in its address to the condi-

tion of modern childhood, where the bombarding message that dreams come true if you just dream hard enough conflicts so perplexingly with the daily realities of bullying, bedwetting, friendlessness, truancy, and warty palms. "Always remember," says Alan Cumming's twisted-genius kidshow host: "whatever you do, always believe in yourself, and your dreams will all come true." [Sings, to brilliant Danny Elfman score:] "It's a cruel cruel world, full of nasty boys and girls/And a lot of nasty people want to have you for their supper/ But there's a way to be free as a bird/On a big TV/ If you dream my dream/You can have it all with me." Yet what's to believe in, when the kids at school call you *The Mummy*? How exactly does dreaming help chubby, insecure eight-year-old couch tubers reinvent themselves as gasp-inducing jetpacked action heroes?

In Rodriguez's mad Tex-Mex salsa of *True Lies*, *Austin Powers* and *Undercover Blues*, the answer is that everything's a facade, and if you find the right button all the panels will flip up and recess to reveal the gadget-teeming, thrill-saturated real world behind. Your parents have *secret lives* where they dress up in black leather and shades and pilot amphibious hardware to save the world from international supervillains and their bumbling robot armies; your family tree is studded with lost and suppositious uncles who are secretly genius scientists specializing in way cool plot technology. Even the brightly-coloured images being beamed into your heart from Cumming's TV are merely a front for secret things, and if you play the soundtrack backwards you hear the actors thinly screaming "Help meee!" Only your obsessive knowledge of your favourite show can redeem its

host, save humanity, and restore your family the way *you* want it.

But as *Spy Kids*' exposé of the new world order makes clear, even supervillains, by which are plainly figured slick Latino action/horror directors, have to account to their producers for delivering colourful children's play figures instead of their trademark violence and horror; and Rodriguez's pretext is that it's not just ironic, but ethnic ironic to boot. As the first Hispanic family blockbuster, *Spy Kids* is a small milestone in the mainstreaming of minority humour, with gleefully south-of-border gags and casting ("Pass the big intestine!" bel-lows new uncle Danny Trejo at the family feast he's just cooked up), and a wily sense of the Latin family as a hipper, more truly attainable version of the middle American dream. "Spy work," goes the deadpan coda: "that's easy. Keeping a family together, that's difficult. And *that's* a mission worth fighting for." If you stick your tongue far enough in your cheek when you say it, you can make it sound true.

For all its fluffiness, it's an extraordinarily sophisticated creation by family-film standards, using the postmodern spy movie as a powerful metaphor engine for a multitude of different aspects of childhood: the secrets of the adult world, the sense of conspiracy and subliminal meanings behind everything; the unbridgeable historical and cultural distance between your parents' cold-war moral landscape and your own less simple world of stateless global enterprise; and yet also, and powerfully enough to subsume both, the innocent joy of toy-driven narrative, where Q-style gimmicks propel you through a world of non-threatening threat in which people get tied up rather than actually hurt. Best of all, and unlike *The Mummy Returns*, it makes no attempt to reassure mom & dad that they've still got it; on the contrary, the old cold warriors are effortlessly outplayed by the new global villains, and it's the kids who have to rescue the kidnapped parents. Always careful to keep moving just a little faster than the speed of thought, *Spy Kids* is 87-minute cinema at its fastest and fullest, keeping the jokes pell-mell and the frames impossibly busy, and shrewdly budgeting no time at the end to revisit the world of the first half-act, where school bullies and their oversized dads presumably still wait at the gates of the real world left so very far behind. "Hey, it's *The Mummy*. Nice-looking bandages, *Mummy*." And you come right back with...? – oh, so sorry, we're right out of time. Maybe in the next life, if you get one.

Nick Lowe



The proteus egg

Matt Colborn

He was fleeing from death. Standing at the bireme's bow, he resisted the urge to touch the jewel that hung in a leather pouch on a loop of twine about his neck. At first, he had tried to conceal it by belting his toga tightly, but now he let the garment flutter about him like an unmastered sail. Behind him, lines of slaves in iron collars drove the ship onward, their oar-strokes timed to an onerous drumbeat. Strange eddies moved under the prow as two great currents flowed together. Schools of porpoise or dolphin would break the surface occasionally, as if patrolling the natural gateway ahead; for they were entering the channel between the great Pillars of Hercules. They passed less than half a mile from one, a towering mass of green-crowned white rock jutting out of the ocean. Across the straits, the other peak was the largest of a chain of ragged red desert mountains, its outline softened by the midday haze. The ship passed the strait rapidly, and turned on its long course to the north. Drinking in the view, he found he was gripping the pouch firmly. To him, it meant life.

"I'm afraid I've got some bad news, love. Grandpa's passed away." My Mother's voice was a distant murmur in the phone, muffled by a faint background hum. I scratched the tipp-exed graffiti on the telephone with a thumb nail, and stared at a yellowing notice in front of me that advertised the local taxi in Paignton.

The corridor ceiling was stained brown-yellow, the miniature chandelier dusty and cobwebbed. Flower pattern wallpaper curled off the walls and the carpet was a splurge of red and purple. Up the stairs, raindrops spat from a gloomy Devon sky onto the landing window.

I remembered him as I had last seen him, a gaunt shadow grinning pearl-white false teeth. His ears stuck out conspicuously. His eyes were dulled by the pain-killers.

"I'll be seeing you," he'd said.

The phone crackled.

"Do you want me to come home?" I asked. There was a moment's silence.

"You're only away tomorrow, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Stay, love. Everything's arranged." Again a hesitation. "I'll see you soon. Love you."

"Love you, too. Good-bye." I hung up.

I hesitated, looking towards the bar. One of the girls was recounting a raucous story.

"... He was so narced that 30 metres down, he pulled his mouthpiece out and was giving air to a crab!" Chris barked with laughter.

I headed upstairs, pausing on the landing to look out of the window. The sea was grey, ruffled with white horses. I considered going home anyway. But I wouldn't be diving at all, if it weren't for him. He'd want me to stay.



We would visit grandfather most summers in the old days. He lived in a cottage in a small village in North Norfolk, by the sea. The cottage was small, whitewashed and semi-detached, its window frames painted blue.

If grandfather was in the front room, Mum would wave and he'd come round the back, opening the gate at the left side of the building. We would follow him up a cobbled passage and through a second gate into the cottage garden. Most times the garden was occupied by his boat on its trailer.

Once inside the cottage, grandfather would sit us around the table in the breakfast room, and, with Radio 4 murmuring in the background, would serve us weak tea. Around one leg of the table was wrapped layer upon layer of denim, for his ancient Siamese to scratch. The cat, suspicious of strangers, would make itself scarce on our arrival.

A sliding door divided the breakfast room from grandfather's workshop, full of tools which I was forbidden to touch. The shelves in the room were lined with plastic boxes crammed with screws, bolts, metal plates, hinges, transistors and doweling rods. On the bench, behind the lathe, was a 1950s radio, in the same half-dismantled

state every time I saw it.

Model ships dominated the workshop, crowding every available flat surface. There were Galleons, sloops, car-racks, a trireme, a frigate and even a nuclear submarine. Some were bottled, some not. Some were tiny, sailing ships for gnats, no more than six inches across. I remember peering in awe at a sloop in a bottle, at the hull delicately painted with the finest of brushes. The rigging, grandfather proudly informed me, was accurate to the last sheet.

Miniature ships were not the only curios in my grandfather's house. On the walls of the little dining room, by the painting of my grandmother, who had died before I was born, were some of his shells. All had been lovingly cleaned, labelled, and glued to a square of wood covered in red velvet and framed. I remember sitting bored amongst the adults during more than one dinner time, my gaze wandering over scallops, oysters, mussels, razors and winkles.

But the real treasures were in the sitting room. In one corner he had a big old cabinet made of mahogany and fronted with glass. In this cabinet he kept what he termed his "oddities."

Along the top shelf was a spiralling horn, a Narwhal's, sold in the 17th century as a unicorn's. On the shelf below this were three Jenny Hanivers, strange, winged fish-like forms with gargoyle faces. Each was varnished and set on a stand of ebony.

"*Draco effictus ex raia*," quoth grandfather: a dragon made from a ray. Below this was a "genuine" mermaid; a monkey's torso sewn onto a salmon's tail. And at the bottom were the Proteus eggs.

One was scrimshaw, the size and shape of a hen's egg, with the figure of a merman complete with crown and flowing beard etched into one side. He'd bought it in Nantucket.

The second was made from a vaguely egg-shaped pebble covered with shells no bigger than the nail on my little finger. From Rome, grandfather told me.

The last was from Fiji; shaped from mother of pearl, it was the simplest, but also the most beautiful.

"But what are they supposed to be?" I had asked as a precocious eight-year-old. He had smiled indulgently, fetching an ancient volume off his bookshelf, flicking to the index and then to the appropriate page.

He had every imaginable book on sea lore. It was in his house that I first read Marryat, Conrad and Hope Hodgson. *Salt Water Ballads* jostled with *Great Steam Ships* and L. Sprague de Camp's *Lost Continents*. And Jacques Cousteau's *The Silent World* had made me long to experience the undersea for myself.

"The Proteus egg," he read, "Was the gift of the scholar god of the sea to the people of Pharos."

"But there are three," I said, baffled. He laughed. "There's only one Virgin Mary, but you can find little plastic models of her everywhere in Catholic countries."

I thought about this.

"So what was the proper one?" He put the book back, and whispered in my ear.

"Nobody knows for sure! The egg was stolen from the

king of Pharos by one of his advisors."

"He must have been very wicked." I said in awe. Grandfather straightened up, laughing again.

"I don't know about wicked. Misguided, maybe. It was the only crime he'd ever committed. Anyway, according to Berossus, he paid for it."

"How?"



Naked and filthy, he landed in the cell, splattering mud and water. He staggered painfully to his feet, craning his neck up, shaking his fists in rage. His feet stamped, bloody and muddy, in tidewater. His beard had grown long, twisted and matted, and faintly green, hiding the pouch that still hung on its twine about his neck. Only his eyes shone bright from a dirt caked face.

Clustered around the edges of the square of light above were the faces of his captors. They were tattooed in intricate blue and were twisted and leering. One spat, the glob hitting him in the face, prompting him to curse violently.

Then they were gone and a slab of stone was pushed across the opening. He was still cursing as the slab sealed his prison. He could hear the sound of hammers bashing it into place. Fragments of stone showered onto his head. After the rain stopped, he stared defiantly up. But the only thing to see were the small dots of light caused by air-holes randomly cut in the rock.

He would not despair. He waded across his prison to the other opening in the rock, obstructed with thick bars of orichalcum. Through this narrow window was the twilight sea, already lapping over the lower edge of the opening.

In fury, he gripped the bars, wringing every ounce of strength out of this atrophied muscles. The bars did not move a fraction. Another swell came, splashing freezing seawater over his emaciated frame.

He sat down, breathing hard. The water was already coming up to his belly and his toes and buttocks were sinking into the filthy ooze at the bottom of the cell. The tide had risen slightly, turning the trickles into a steady inundation. Soon, he was up to his chest in freezing brine.

Desperation overcame him and he flew at the bars again, gripping them tight once more. He rocked back, hoping the weight of his body would be enough to loosen them. He wrenched at them, screaming as he did so.

The chamber was three quarters full when he had to start treading water. The opening below was completely covered and there was only about a cubit left between the surface of the water and the ceiling. Every so often, a swell would narrow that gap, and there would be tiny sighs from the airholes above. By the time he had about a hand's length left, he was paddling under the largest of the holes, a tube about a palm's width in diameter. The remaining space was almost pitch dark now, and he could see no light at the other end of the tiny opening above him.

Then the water reached the ceiling.

He held his breath. His hands clawed the ceiling,

instinct taking over. Bubbles of air flew from his mouth. His eyes bulged and his skin tingled. Pressure grew in his stomach, and his throat tightened. He inhaled, his body thrashing maniacally. Gradually his struggles slowed, his limbs relaxing. He floated motionless in the dark.



The sun woke him. He opened his eyes, wincing in the light. He lay in about six inches of water, his ribcage expanding, trying to suck in air.

He sat up, staring at the scum on the surface of the water. His stomach heaved and his lungs ached. He hugged his belly, trying to vomit. Water trickled out of his throat and down his tongue. His nose was irritated. He was puking seawater, drawing in brief, desperate breaths with every expellation. Then he could breathe again.

He squatted for some minutes, blinking stinging salt out of his eyes. He was terribly weak and every joint ached. He was shivering violently. And yet he began to laugh.

What fools they were! As long as he kept his nerve, he could survive. As long as he kept his wits, he could think and reason, and escape! It would be hard, yes, but now he was different from them. His finger sought the pouch, and he smiled. He would be strong.

He stood up, ignoring the pain crackling up his legs. The water was already lapping at the base of the opening. A tiny tremor of fear went through him, and, fleetingly, he felt the urge to throw the pouch away. But he suppressed this, thinking of the tattooed savages who had done this thing to him. What he would do to his captors, once he escaped!

When the water closed once more over his head, he was ready. Steeling himself, he deliberately inhaled. His body convulsed momentarily, shuddering at the blasphemy he was performing.

Head singing, he blinked in the dim, green light. Through a blur, he could still see faint sunlight flooding in below him. He swam down, desperate to distract himself, and peered out. He was past cold now, his body so numb that the nerves seemed dead. When he gripped the bars, he could not feel anything. A vague blob, probably a fish, was peering in at him. He shooed it away.

He crouched in the corner of his cell after that, brain working over plans, contingencies. What he would do when he was free! After his revenge, he would travel again, acquire incredible riches and maybe, once more, gain the ear of great kings. In a generation, or two, it might even be safe enough to visit his own land. His mind wandered, and it seemed that he could see Pharos now, gleaming onyx white by the azure sea, fringed by the savagely beautiful desert mountains.

But there was no way out: the ancient builders had designed their trap too well. He tried again and again to pound the sealed slab above. They must have deposited a ton of rocks above it, for it was immobile. He tried to use some loose rock to chip away at the base of the bars,

but such rock always crumbled in his hand. The days, and the floods, fled by.

After the 50th inundation he decided to take his own life. The window was a square of sombre blue and every breath was cold as a knife. He reached for the pouch. He would take just one more look, just one, before casting the egg out to sea. His fingers were too numb to unpick the knots, but the hemp was rotten and damp and pulled apart easily. Hands trembling, he tipped the jewel from the pouch into his cupped hand. It was a stone of translucent milk white, like a pearl, but the shape and size of a goose's egg. In the semi-dark it seemed to glow with its own, inner light. He stroked it, hypnotized, then, remembering his purpose, he grasped the egg to throw it. But he couldn't lift it out of his palm. Horror crept over him; he could feel the skin of his palm being tugged when he pulled at the egg.

Finally, he was screaming, desperately wrenching at the jewel. His fingers slithered on the shiny surface, and the nugget seemed to settle itself further in the harder he tried to pull it out. He began bashing the rock against the wall of his cell, but he only succeeded in bloodying his hand.

He crouched in a corner, hand limp, finally sobbing. Outside, the sun had risen, and the swell was once more slowly flooding his cell.



I hit the ocean swell, and the breath went out of me. Chris was in already, snug in his dry-suit. The sea was the colour of slate. Jagged rocks protruding from the sea towered above us, black as hell against an angry sky.

"If your salt-water baptism's in this country it's often a shock, but relax!" Chris had joked on the boat, winking. "At least the sea's warmer than those quarries!" That felt like a small compensation in these heaving waters. I felt as helpless as a cork held in a fist.

Chris had one hand held above the water, forefinger and thumb in an "O," the other fingers splayed. I parroted the gesture, figuring that I was as Okay as I'd ever be. He showed thumbs down, and when I reciprocated, he sank like a stone. I struggled on the surface for a moment, face down in the water. Below, Chris was already vanishing into the yellow-green murk in a cloud of bubbles. I was still fumbling with the air release on the jacket, fingers clumsy in latex. At last I began to sink, pinching my nose and blowing air into my ears to relieve the mounting pain in my sinuses. In a matter of seconds I had arrived at where Chris was waiting on the sea bed.

It was dark there. The rocks loomed, dangerous. They were covered with dead men's fingers, sea pens and snake-locks' anemone whose tendrils squirmed like anaemic worms in the current. A lone wrasse picked its way among them, too big to be engulfed.

We began to fin gently with the current, working our way along the cliff side. Visibility gradually worsened; at one point we could only see a foot of two in front of us. When the water cleared a little, we could see edible crabs perched in crevices in the rock, peering at us with obsid-

ian eyes. And once a spider crab, a spindly, knobbed alien, crept away from our approach.

The current got colder. Water was leaking into my mask. I held the top of the mask, craned my neck upwards, and snorted through my nose, as they'd taught us. My expel-lations drove the water out, slowly. I finished this procedure and looked around, my guts tightening as I did so.

Chris was nowhere to be seen, and the cliff side was slowly wandering past me. My mind span, the wheeze of my own breath ringing in my ears. The water was dimming from pea green to green-black. My sinuses hurt. I pinched my nose again and blew. One ear squeaked. Alone in the bitter green dark, I squirted more air into my stab jacket, but it wasn't inflating.

If you lose your buddy, you should surface at once – the instruction echoed in my memory. I looked around wildly for Chris. Below me, I saw a soft, green-yellow light apparently flooding out of the cliff. I stared at it in alarm, my breathing staccato, thoughts spinning in hypoxic speculation, for the glow was fading as I watched. I sunk a little further to investigate, part of me screaming for ascent.

The illumination had appeared to emanate from a cavity opening which was about three feet square. Its edges were covered in soft corals and mussels, and I gingerly balanced on my elbows and looked in. There were three metal bars, swollen by corrosion. Beyond was a space, now pitch black. Had I imagined the light?

But then I saw a faint, greenish, glow move from one corner of what was evidently a sizeable chamber. The glow seemed to be shifting slowly in my direction, propelled perhaps by the current. Some luminescent bacteria, I supposed. I stared in fascination at the light, the rational part of me nagging every second for a return to the surface. Then the face came, out of the dark.

It hung in the chamber, lit from below. The luminescence highlighted high cheekbones over drawn cheeks, and cavernous eye-sockets. The forehead was high, the skull naked, a lead ball on a stick-neck. It was a dead face. But the eyes were alive, sitting like crabs in the sockets.

It spoke. I don't mean that its mouth moved, or even that I heard a voice in my head. All I know is that in a few seconds, we communicated. I nodded and removed my glove, reached through the bars, and grasped the piteous, algae-green hand that had been proffered, that held the source of the light. Something was pressed into my hand. A look of peace came over the pathetic features and the hand was suddenly limp in mine. I released it in sudden terror, still grasping the object, and pumped air into my jacket, eager to escape from this terrible place.

Then I was rising out of those treacherous depths, floating in the fluids of the womb, warm, safe, my vision a vague, amniotic blur. Bubbles fled past me as we raced upwards. I was unconscious when I reached the surface.



I awoke ten hours later. They moved me from intensive care and I lay in a ward opposite a large window over-

looking the ocean. In the bed next to me, an emphysemic man coughed sporadically and violently in his sleep. His relatives had, thoughtfully enough, sent him lilies, which languished in a thin glass vase by his bed.

My chest was sore as misery and I felt too exhausted to move, but the morphine they had given me was kicking in and I didn't care. I lay on my back, my arms on top of the blankets, hugged tight to my body. My left hand was bunched rigid.

It was very late. There were lights out to sea: fishing boats, I supposed. The twinkling pinpoints mirrored the stars in the sky.

Someone moved in the half-lit ward, momentarily eclipsing them. I felt a slight pressure on the side of one leg, heard a familiar, wheezing breath. The fingers of my left hand were gently but methodically unclasped.

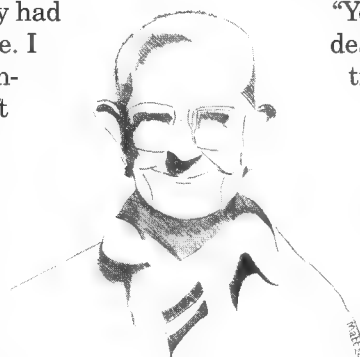
"I'll have that, if you don't mind, Tim. It's done you a good turn, but in the long run it'll do me a lot less harm."

"Grandfather?"

"Tim, relax your hand," he said quietly.

"Anything," I sighed, letting go.

"Thank you," he said. "You were always a lucky one."



Not only did you survive a dive like that, but you managed to free an old friend of ours!"

"Who?"

"Just someone who once made a mistake."

I didn't understand, but dreams are seldom logical.

"You can find out a lot of things when you're dead, Tim, if you know where to look," he continued. "It's a sort of compensation."

"I don't understand!" I complained. He smiled false teeth.

"Don't worry about it." He touched my forehead.

"Tim?" he said.

"Yes?"

"Look after your mother." His hand felt warm, dry, not at all how I expected a dead person's hand would feel.

"It's time," he quoted, "I quit the deck and went aloft."

And I closed my eyes and slept till the next, bright, morning.

Matt Colborn published his first story, "The City in the Dusk," in *Interzone* 165. He comes from Careby, near Stamford, Lincolnshire, and is currently completing a PhD in biology at the University of Sussex, Brighton.

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The Sea of Death

Neal Asher

*So lay they garmented in torpid light,
Under the pall of a transparent night,
Like solemn apparitions lull'd sublime,
To everlasting rest, – and with them Time
Slept, as he sleeps upon the silent face
Of a dark dial in a sunless place.*

— Hood

To say it is cold is to seriously understate the matter. The inside of the shuttle is at minus-50 centigrade because of what Don calls “material tolerances.”

“These coldsuits we’re wearing – take ’em above zero and they’ll fuck up next time you use ’em outside,” he told me.

“Yeah,” I said. “Two centuries ago I’d have believed you, but things have moved on since then.”

“Economics ain’t,” was his reply.

I am careful not to respond to his sarcasm.

The landing is without mishap, but I am surprised when the side of the shuttle opens straight down onto the surface of the planet Orbus.

“No point maintaining an entrance tunnel,” says Don over the com.

I don’t mind. It is for moments like this that I travel, and it is moments like this that fund my travel. I walk out with CO₂ snow crunching underfoot and the clarity of starlit sky above that you normally only get in interstellar space. I gaze across land like arctic tundra with its frozen lakes and hoared boulders. In the frozen lakes trapped fairie lights flicker rainbow colours.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Water ice. Below 150 it turns to complex ice and when it heats up and changes back it fluoresces. Talk to Duren if you want the chemistry of it.”

I don’t need to. I remember reading that this is what comets do. It took a little while for people to figure that the light of comets is not all reflected sunlight – that comets emit light before they should.

“What’s heating it up?” I ask, turning to gaze at the distant green orb of the dying sun.

“The shuttle, our landing. There’s nothing else here to do it,” he replies.

We walk the hundred or so metres to the base and go in through a coldlock. In the lock we remove our coldsuits and hang them up. Don points to the white imprint of a hand on the grey surface of the inner door.

“Keep your undersuit and gloves on until we’re inside,” he tells me. I stare at the imprint in puzzlement. Is it some kind of safety sign? Don obviously notes my confusion. He explains.

“Fella took his gloves off before going through the door,” he says.

The imprint is the skin of that fella’s hand, and some of the flesh too.

Later I speak to Linser, the base commander, and ask why they take such risks here. We stand in his room gazing out of a panoramic window across the frozen wastes.

“Thermostable and thermo-inert materials are expensive, Mr Gregory. A thermoceramic cutting head for a rock-bore costs the best part of 50,000 New Earth shillings and has to be shipped in. Doped water-ice cutting heads can be made here. Coldsuits that can function from +30 to –200 cost 50 times as much as the ones we use. That’s a big saving for a small inconvenience,” he says.

“I never thought this operation short of funds,” I say.

“Energy is money and there’s none of the former here. It costs 1,500 shillings a minute to keep one human alive and comfortable. We have over 2,000 personnel.”

I walk up beside him and focus on what has now caught his attention. Machines for moving rock and ice are busily gnawing at the frozen crust out there. Floodlights bathe something that appears a little like a building site.

“Found an entrance right under our noses,” he tells me.

“Lucky,” say I.

He turns to me with an expression tired and perhaps a little irrational.

“Lucky?... Oh yes, you’ve been in transit. You haven’t seen the latest survey results. You see, we were having a bit of a Schrödinger problem with the deep scanners. The energy of the scan was enough to cause fluorescence of the water ices down there, full-spectrum fluorescence. It was like shining a torch into a cave and having the beam of that torch turn on a floodlight. We saw only a fraction of it until we started using those low-energy scanners.”

“A fraction?” I say. “Last I heard you’d mapped 20,000 kilometres of tunnels.”

“That’s nothing. Nothing at all. They’re everywhere you see. Yesterday Duren told me that they even go under the frozen seas. We’re looking at millions of kilometres of tunnels, more than a hundred million burial chambers with

one or more sarcophagi in each.”

I absorb this information in silence, slot it in with a hundred other details I’ve been picking up right from Farstation Base to here.

“Obviously I want to see one of the sarcophagi,” I eventually tell him.

He glances at me. “See and touch it, I would have thought. Unfortunately you don’t get to smell anything. Too cold for decay here,” he says.

“Seeing and hearing are the most important,” I reply. “Most people don’t go for full immersion for a documentary. There are much more enjoyable FI entertainments.”

“Okay, get yourself settled in and we’ll run you down in an hour or so. Will you be needing any of your equipment off the shuttle?”

“No, I have my eyes and ears,” I reply.

He studies me, his inspection straying to the aug’ nestled behind my right ear. He seems too tired to display the usual discomfort of those confronted by a human recorder like myself.

The tunnels resemble very closely the Victorian sewers of Old London on Earth. The bricks are made of water ice and are, on the whole, over three-quarters of a million years old. A strange juxtaposition of age and impermanence. Just raise the temperature and all the tunnels will be gone. Of course, the temperature will not rise here for many thousands of years. Duren, who walks with me to the first chamber, is distracted and gloomy. I have to really push to get anything out of him. Finally he comes out with a terse and snappy summation.

He tells me, “It will keep on getting colder and colder, but not constantly so. Every 800 years we get the Corlis conjunction and the resultant volcanic activity. In about 100,000 years Corlis will fall in orbit round here and all hell will break loose for a time. The volcanic activity will destroy all these tunnels, melt all the ice. That’ll last for a few hundred years, then things will settle down and freeze again.”

“So future archaeologists will have to dig the sarcophagi out of the ice?” I ask.

He waves his hand towards a side chamber and we duck into there. The lights inside are of a lower luminence than those outside. They don’t want the light damaging things, apparently.

“Doubt that. Hundred thousand years and we’ll know all we need to know about this place. We’ll let them sleep in peace then.”

I stare at him and try to figure the tone of his voice. It is too difficult to read his expression through his coldsuit mask, though.

The sarcophagi are metallic chrysalides averaging three metres in length. I say metallic because they appear to be made of brass. I am told that they were made of something very complex that does have as its basis some copper compounds. I ask if it is organic. I am told no, it is manufactured – it isn’t complex enough to be organic.

There are two sarcophagi in the chamber. One off alone, untouched and easily viewed, the other so shrouded in scanning equipment I do not know it is there until Duren

tells me I can look inside.

No one has yet opened a *sarcophagus*, simply because there is not a lot more to be learned that has not already been learned by scanning. Inside each sarcophagus, suspended in water ice that is thick with organic chemicals, is an alien. These aliens are frightening. What is most frightening about them is how closely they resembled us. They have arms and legs much in proportion to our own. Their bodies are longer and wasp-waisted, their feet strange hooked two-toed things, and their hands equally as strange, with six fingers protruding from all sorts of odd points, and no palms. Their heads... how best to describe their heads? Take an almond and rest it on its side, expand it only where the neck joins it, hang two sharp barbs at the nose end and back from that punch a hole straight through for eyes... It is theorized that they must have used some kind of sonar sense. This is just one of the theories.

When the first sarcophagus was found people started to bandy about phrases like “parallel evolution” while others claimed credence for their own pet theories. Those of a religious bent called the discovery proof of the existence of God, though the self-same people had heretofore claimed that the discovery of no humanlike races was also proof of the existence of God. Some claimed the discovery evidenced ancient alien visitations of Earth, whilst still others talked of interstellar seeding. How very personal, human, and petty is each theory. Coming to make my documentary about the catacombs of Orbus and the passing destruction of the moonlet Corlis I have not thought which of them to give credence.

“Do you think it’s parallel evolution?” I ask Duren as I peer through the scanner.

“Does a scorpion look like a human? It evolved under the same conditions and even on the same planet,” he says, and totally destroys the parallel evolution argument.

“What about interstellar seeding?”

“Same arguments apply,” he says, and of course they do.

“God?” I ask.

He laughs in my face then says, “I try to understand it. I don’t try to cram it in to fit my understanding.”

He definitely has the essence of it there.

I hesitate to call this my first night here as there is little to mark the change from day to night. You could go outside and spot the sun in the sky, but as Orbus revolves about it once every three solstan centuries that wouldn’t be much help. The personnel at the base work a shift system. My waking period concurs with that of Duren, Don, and about 500 others who I have yet to meet. After a night of mares in which I am chased down Victorian sewers by subzero rats I wake to a day of subterfuge and obfuscation. Something has happened and people either don’t know or don’t want to tell the nosy bastard from the Netpress. I use the most powerful weapon in my armoury to get to the bottom of it. Don takes my bribe.

We don coldsuits in the ball-shrinking coldlock and step on out. Don leads me to one of the tracked surface cars they call a crawler and we motor over to the nearby excavation. I still find it difficult to take in that the treads

of the vehicle we ride in are made of doped water ice. The whole idea of using such a substance makes me see our civilization as so delicate, so temporary. I guess my objection is that this is the truth.

The excavation is a tunnel that cuts at 30° through rock and ice into the side of one of the Victorian sewers. This is the way I came yesterday with Duren to view the body, so to speak. We climb out of the crawler and Don approaches a suited figure who is walking up from the slope.

"What's happening, Jerry?" Don asks over the com. He has told me to keep my mouth shut and my ears open for the present.

The woman who replies sounds tired and irritated.

"Duren flipped. He cut open the sarc in B27 and started to thaw out the chicken. Security got on to him and he took his crawler into the system."

Don says, "Always thought he was a bit too close to 'em. He was on it from the start wasn't he?"

"You know he was," says the woman, her irritation increasing. I wince: Don isn't very good at subterfuge.

"What's happening now?" he quickly asks.

"They still haven't found him and the computer quite competently tells us that for every hour we don't find him our chances of finding him halve. Ain't technology wonderful?"

"What about the sarcophagus and the corpse?"

"Linser says 'waste not, want not' or some such ancient bullshit. He's having them moved inside for intensive study... Here they come now."

I stare down the slope and see one of the crawlers towing something up the slope. I glance round at Don and make the hand signal he has only recently taught me. We both switch our com units to private mode.

"The Corlis intersection is in two solstan days. Would this Duren survive that?" I ask.

Don replies, "Depends where he is, but yeah, most likely, though not much beyond it. His suit would have to go onto CO₂ conversion after a day and that drains the power pack."

"So he'd freeze and join the rest of them here."

"That about sums it up, yeah."

Corlis is hammering towards us at 50,000 kilometres per hour; pretty slow in cosmological terms. It is the size of Earth's moon and not much different in appearance. Its major differences are its huge elliptical orbit and the smattering of ices on its surface. It will pass close enough to Orbus to perturb both their orbits. Orbus's orbit will change by only a fraction, Corlis's orbit will wind in a completely different spirograph shape round the sun. This has been happening for about three-quarters of a million years and is set to change, in 100,000 years, when Corlis will finally be captured by Orbus. It's funny, but I find most of the scientific staff rather reluctant to discuss the coincidence of dates: the aliens have been frozen for the same length of time that Corlis has been on its erratic orbit. Only Linser has anything useful to offer.

"These tunnels, chambers and sarcophagi are all that survived the disaster that sent Corlis on its way, or maybe, they are all that survived Corlis's arrival in this system. The tunnels survived because they are so deep. There was

probably a surface civilization but it's all gone now."

It doesn't ring true.

"When Corlis passes here tomorrow, will we be safe?" I ask.

"Oh yes. The nearest disturbance will be 500 kilometres away at a fault line," Linser replies. I get him to show me exactly where on a map, then thank him for his help before going off to see if I can steal a crawler. It is a surprisingly easy task to accomplish.

Just kilometre after kilometre of brick-lined tunnels. To begin with I stop at a few side-chambers but find them all depressingly the same. A map screen inside the crawler shows my current position and just how far I have to go. A quick inspection of the mapping index gives me files filled with thousands of such pages, and directories filled with thousands of such files. Linser told me they had mapped but a fraction of the system. I have to wonder if there is any point in continuing – it obviously covers the entire planet and is much the same everywhere. While I am studying this screen a message flicks up in the corner and is also repeated over my coldsuit com.

"All right, everybody, we're not going to find him before conjunction. I want you all back at base by 1200. Linser out."

I look at the message in the corner of the map screen and realize that the only reason I have not been caught is that a lot of crawlers are out being used in the search for Duren. It only occurs to me now that all the crawlers must have some sort of beacon on them, some way that they can be traced, and that Duren must have disabled it on his own. I immediately try to use the crawler's computer to find out more about the beacon. On the menu I get beacon diagnostics and a hundred and one things I can do with said beacon. I cannot find where the damned thing is though.

"Number 107, didn't you get my message?"

Linser sounds a bit peeved. I ignore him while I continue to try and locate the beacon.

"Ah, I see," say Linser. "That crawler is not your property, Mr Gregory."

I decide it is time for me to respond. "I'll return it to you in one piece," I say.

"How very civil of you. You do realize you're heading directly for the nearest fault line; an area that is going to become very dangerous only a few hours from now?"

"Yes, I do know," I reply. "I'm sure that's where Duren is."

There is a pause, then when Linser speaks again it is with a deal of irritation.

"So you think we have not already searched Duren's most obvious destination?" he asks.

I feel a sinking in the pit of my stomach, but stubbornness prevents me from turning the crawler round.

"You may have missed him," I say.

"Well," Linser replies, "if you are intent on getting yourself killed then that is your problem. We will bill Netpress for any damage to the crawler and for the recovery of your body. Good day to you, Mr Gregory."

He manages to make me feel like a complete idiot and I nearly turn back, but the stubbornness remains. It has been pointed out to me that stubbornness is not strength.

It is in fact a weakness. I keep driving.

Two hours pass and the first tremor hits. As the tunnel vibrates and little flecks of ice fall onto the crawler's screen, I replay the conversation I had with Duren as we walked back to his crawler after viewing the dead alien:

"Most people would wonder if they are in cryostasis," I said.

"They're not," Duren replied. "They are decayed even though they were pickled in brine before that brine froze."

"Were they all preserved at the same time?" I asked.

"Oh yes."

"How do you account for that, then: a hundred million of them going into their sarcophagi at the same time?"

Duren was silent for a while. I didn't push him.

"I did say that they are not in cryostasis," he said. "I did not say that some attempt may not have been made to put them in such."

"Is that what you think?"

"It's one possibility. Other possibilities include mass murder and mass suicide. It's weird, it's an anomaly, and it just is."

A lump of ice falls from the ceiling and bounces off the screen of the crawler. I nearly fill my pants.

"You've got a lot of seismic activity out there," says Linser over the com.

"No shit," I reply.

Just at that moment a big one hits and the crawler slides a couple of yards to one side. I steer back central and note a huge crack dividing the icy ceiling and exposing rock a couple of metres above. Something occurs to me then and I wonder if I will get a reply that will again make me feel stupid.

"Hey, Linser."

"Yes."

"They've been here for three-quarters of a million years. I make that about a thousand conjunctions. How come I haven't seen any old damage in these tunnels? That's a thousand earthquakes."

Again there is that long pause and I await Linser's slapdown. It does not come.

"That is an interesting question, Mr Gregory. There is no damage in the area where you are and that area is an unstable one. You must remember, though, that we only recently acquired the low-energy scanners and that area is the only unstable area we have mapped so far."

"Yeah. Wouldn't it have been an idea to have mapped some of the other unstable areas before the conjunction?"

"For what purpose?" he asks.

"To find out if there's any old damage there."

"I'm sure such information would be of interest to a planetary geologist, but we are here for the archaeology," he says.

He either doesn't get it or is trying to give me the brush-off.

"If there's no damage there that will be because the damage has been repaired. Oh, by the way, you got any other crawlers in this area?"

"To answer your question: no, we do not have any other crawlers in that area."

"Then it looks like I've found Duren... Tell me, Linser, have you found any evidence, other than the tunnels and the sarcophagi, of their technology?"

"No, we have not."

"Funny, that," I say, and get out of the crawler.

Duren is inside a large chamber that contains three sarcophagi. He has strung up lights all around and as I walk in through the round door he has his back to me. He is using a cutter to slice open a sarcophagus. There seems nothing scientific about what he is doing. It looks like vandalism. I speak to him over private com.

"Duren," I say.

He turns and holds the business end of the cutting unit in my direction. The disruption field only has a range of a couple of centimetres. I have no intention of getting within that range.

"You... What are you doing out here?" he asks.

It strikes me that he does not sound particularly irrational.

"I've come to see what you are trying to prove," I say.

Duren stares at me for a long moment then abruptly turns back to cutting open the sarcophagus. I move round to a position where I can better see what he is doing.

"You know, it was this place being frozen that led us astray," he says. "First you think of cryostasis and expect the bodies to be perfect. We found decayed bodies in thick frozen brine and thought it was cryostasis gone wrong. When we found no sign of their technology we then assumed this was some kind of burial."

"What is the truth?" I ask.

He throws back the piece of sarcophagus he has cut away and it crashes to the floor.

"The truth? The truth is that –"

As he is just about to fill me in on "the truth" the biggest earthquake hits. I am on a floor split by a crack half a metre wide. A haze of broken ice fills the air and huge chunks fall from the ceiling. I hear Duren yelling over the com but cannot make out what he is saying. Something heavy bounces off the helmet of my suit and I realize that I might not actually get out of this alive. I bury my head under my arms and wish I had enough belief in something to pray to it.

When the quake is over, some eight minutes later, Duren grabs my arm and hauls me to my feet. "We'll do better in the crawlers," he says.

We are in the crawlers when the next quake hits, and the one after that. My crawler ends up on its side with one tread smashed and the ice all around. I don't get out of it until Duren comes and raps on the screen.

"Is that it?" I ask, as I climb out the only door I can get through.

Duren shrugs. "Might be a few more aftershocks, but that's the worst of it, I think."

I study my surroundings. The tunnel is wrecked: the floor is a metre deep in shattered ice, and rock is exposed in many places. I follow Duren into the chamber.

"I didn't need to do it," he says, and points.

The sarcophagus next to the one he has cut open has a huge dent in it where a boulder has fallen from the ceiling. There is also a split where the dent is deepest.

"They're not particularly strong and yet we've never found a broken one, just as we've never found a tunnel as badly damaged as that one," he says, gesturing towards the tunnel.

"And what does that mean?" I ask, not sure I want to know the answer.

"This is a cold world and here we make things out of frozen water. It never occurred to us that those who lived here would do the same. Frozen, salty water filled with all kinds of impurities. We should have looked closer at those impurities," he says.

"You're not exactly making yourself clear," I say.

He gestures all around us at the shattered ice.

"Here is their technology. Here is the world in which they lived and will live when they have the energy."

"What energy?" I ask.

"Geothermal," he replies, as if it obvious.

I only start to get it when the ice melts.

In some way the energy is distributed through the ice very evenly. One minute we are surrounded by shattered ice, the next minute we are up to our waists in water that has an almost glutinous consistency.

"Here they come," says Duren while I wonder if I am going to drown on this insane world. It takes me a moment to digest what he has said. I turn to the door and see one of the aliens standing there up to its crotch in the water. Standing, it looks like an insectile man with a horse's skull for a head. I have never been this scared.

"What... what's happening?" I ask.

"The repair teams are about their work," he says.

"I thought you said they were dead," I say, and though wondering why I am whispering, am unable to stop myself.

"I never said such a thing. I may have misled you, but I never said they were dead."

I feel like hitting him, but I don't dare move. A second alien comes in through the entrance. Both almond-shaped heads turned towards us. I know that if they come at us I will almost certainly shit my pants.

"But they were decayed," I say.

"It takes energy to prevent decay. Decay is one form of entropy. With little energy to spare you don't squander it. If you have the technology you reverse entropy when you do have the energy... You know, it's easier to store information than to store bodies."

The two aliens finish studying us then abruptly wade to the sarcophagi. One of them picks up the piece of metal that Duren has cut away and pushes it back into place.

"You're still not making yourself clear," I say.

Duren turns his head towards me and I can see his expression. He looks as frightened as I feel, though it doesn't come over in his oh-so-correct voice.

"If I wanted to preserve you over a long period of time I would record your thought patterns to crystal and keep a spit of your genetic material to regrow your body. That's all I'd need."

The aliens step back and trail their strange appendages in the glutinous water. That water rises up in a glistening wave over the sarcophagi. Through it I can see the damage spontaneously repairing.

Duren goes on, "I don't know how they did it. Their

technology is in the water, mostly. I think there is something here of both burial and preservation. They don't need entire bodies for resurrection. Maybe they've kept them so they can repair them from the DNA template, maybe that would use less energy."

"If it's in the water, what are the sarcophagi for?" I ask.

"The technology is in the water; self-repairing, regenerating. What they are, their minds and perhaps the DNA templates, are in the sarcophagi. We spent too much time studying the contents of the containers when we should have been studying everything but the contents of the containers."

The water recedes from the sarcophagi and they are both whole and undamaged. It then proceeds to crawl up the walls and across the ceiling. The two aliens turn and observe us, or so it seems. They have no eyes.

"What now?" I ask Duren.

"I have no idea," the scientist replies.

I see that the water on the floor, on the walls, and on the ceiling is dividing into liquid bricks – reforming to how it was before the earthquake. I point this out to Duren.

"Just enough geothermal energy from the quakes to repair the damage they made. Neat," he says.

One of the aliens squats and places its appendage in the water again. A snake of water, like a rivulet in reverse, traverses Duren's body. It seems to be probing all round his coldsuit. When it tries to get into his mask he slaps at it and it drops away, suddenly only water again. The aliens tilt their heads, then abruptly stride to the entrance through ankle-deep water holding the shape of bricks. We follow them out into the tunnel and there see that the treads have melted away on both of the crawlers. We follow them through the water to a point where the water is suddenly ice again – a neat line round the circumference of the tunnel. We watch them climb back into their own sarcophagi – the water still liquid inside – and seal themselves in.

"They didn't do anything," I say.

"They wanted to," said Duren, "but they probably didn't have the energy to spare."


As we walk back to the crawlers I ask him what will happen now that this is known.

"The project won't be shut down by accountants. We'll get funding from Earth Central itself. Maybe, sometime, we'll resurrect them all," he says.

"It would be nice to see," I say, after we have made a call for help from the transmitter of my crawler. And I wonder if we will see it, because, of course, the warming of our coldsuits has damaged them, and they are already starting to malfunction.

Perhaps you, who are experiencing this documentary, will see.

Neal Asher, born 1961, lives in Chelmsford, Essex, and the above is his first story for *Interzone* – although he has published many previous stories in small-press magazines. Last year he signed a three-book contract with Macmillan, and the first of those novels, *Gridlinked*, appeared in March 2001.



The Second Question

Mat Coward

If time travel's possible, where are all the time travellers? You hear that cliché over and over, offered as neat proof that time travel can never happen. It's always annoyed me, that smug little riddle. I've always thought it sounded slick and incomplete, but I've never known how to answer it – until recently.

The nearest I could get to what I meant, in those days of my ignorance, was this: saying "*If time travel's possible, where are all the time travellers?*" is the rough equivalent of time-travelling back to 1066, telling Bill the Conq. all about electricity, and him replying, with a pitying smile, "OK, pal, but explain something to me – if electricity's possible, where are all the toasters?"

See? That make any sense at all? An absence of artefacts, or of practitioners, does not in and of itself defeat a theory.

So – just suppose. Suppose a man did indeed travel back in time. Never mind *how* he did it; the mechanics aren't important. They'd change, in any case, depending on when he did it. If it was the 1950s, it'd be atomic power; if it was the 1990s, it'd probably be feng shui. That's not

important, but... suppose a man went back.

Suppose, the first time, he went back just three days, and caught a bus to a pub of which, in Home Time, he had recently become a regular customer. He walked up to the bar, smiled at the barman, and said: "Hi. Remember me?"

Bear in mind that his mission was to answer the conundrum: "Since we now know that time travel is most definitely possible, where indeed *are* all the time travellers?" Therefore, he was not being discreet. He didn't go through a tough briefing session in which he was meticulously taught and tested on contemporary idioms, and things that mustn't be revealed, and the ethics of time travel in regard to off-course betting or ancestor-nobbling. He was not subjected to a painstaking search of his person, to eliminate contamination via as-yet-unpatented designs of wristwatch or dental amalgam or communications equipment. He travelled, that is to say, as a time traveller; open and plain for all to see.

The barman gave him a funny look. "What do you mean, do I remember you?"

"Well, humour me, Ricky. I'll have a pint, by the way.

What I mean is, when did you last see me?"

Ricky poured a pint of Pride, and swapped it for my five pound note. As he made change, he said: "Two minutes ago? You went to the Gents. Then you came back. Now you're drinking a fresh pint even though you haven't finished the last one yet." He pointed at a half-empty beer glass a few feet down the bar. "This isn't one of your legendary *amusing japes*, is it, Eldridge? Because I might as well give you advance warning – I'm not in that sort of mood. I'm more in a telling-wazocks-to-fart-off sort of mood."

"Actually, I'm from the future," I said, and winked at him over the rim of my glass. A sound from the rear of the pub caught my ear, and tickled my memory. Ah yes, now I knew it. It was the sound of the door to the Gents, sighing pneumatically as it opened and closed.

"You're back then," said Whitecoat, and I was.

"I've cracked it," I said. "I was pulled back just as my old self came out of the lavatory, into the pub. Right?"

"So?"

"So, the only absolute proof you could ever offer a past-timer that you were from the fyooch would be to stand right next to your own self and gesture from your new self to your old self with your thumbs – like so – and say, like, *Notice anything odd?*"

Whitecoat paused in the act of lighting a small cigar. After a second or so, the match burned his fingers. "That's how you'd do it, is it?"

"Got to be. Anything else – a fancy wrist-phone, say, or the results of next year's election – could be too easily dismissed by the sceptical as, for instance, a Japanese prototype which you'd somehow got your sticky little paws on, in the first case, or as lucky guesswork in the second."

"Or merely," said Whitecoat, between sips from a tall beaker of clear liquid, "as astonishing proof of clairvoyance."

"Right, exactly!" Encouraged, I went on. "However, as we have just demonstrated, it is impossible to stand next to your old self with your new self, and demonstrate things with your thumbs. Can't be done. As soon as Old Me came out of the Gents—"

"Hope he washed his hands."

"Always. As soon as he appeared, New Me vanished. Thus establishing that there exists a kind of law of nature, similar to those pertaining to gravity or thermody-thingy, which automatically kicks in to prevent such meetings occurring, for reasons having to do with maintenance of the integrity of time-space."

"And thus, nobody has ever reported meeting a time traveller because nobody has ever had absolute proof of having met one?" He put his overcoat on.

"Right, exactly! We could call it Eldridge's First Law of Time-Space Integrity!"

"You were pulled back, Eldridge, at that precise moment, because that was the precise moment at which I pulled the pull-back switch, due to Whitecoat's Second Law of Overtime, which is 'I don't work late when I have a dinner date with my cousin who I haven't seen for 15 years.'"

"Oh. Yeah, but... oh. OK," I said. "But what's Whitecoat's First Law of Overtime?"

"I don't work late when I'm not getting paid for it, even on those rare nights when I do not have a pressing social engagement.' Tell you what, you're right about the impossibility of meeting yourself in the past, though."

"Hey! Well, there you go – that's something, right?"

"Yep. We've known about it for years. The maths is boringly simple. You sleeping here tonight?"

The time traveller nodded. He didn't really have anywhere else to sleep.

"All right, well this time just make sure you turn off the lights before you crash out. Got that? Lights cost money."

As far as broad theory went, this was about as far as we'd got: that since we now knew that time travel was not only possible, but actual, therefore the answer to the original question – where are all the time travellers? – was clearly, "They're here."

Which gave rise to what became known as the Second Question: "OK, then, if all these time travellers are here, how come I can't see them?" Which Whitecoat said was the same question, asked by a slightly stupider person, but my own view of life is that I like to get things clear, even if that means spelling everything out. The business of travelling into the future being impossible, for instance; at first Whitecoat would only say that it was impossible because "The best minds of our generation have demonstrated it to be so," but eventually, and with little grace, he explained further: you can't travel into the future because, by definition, the future, unlike the past and the present, doesn't yet exist. I said, I don't see how you can know that for sure, and he said, Oh for God's sake, Eldridge, why can't you ever simply be *told* something?

OK, then, suppose the second time the time traveller went back, he went back to a time before he was born, in order to get around the natural law concerning not meeting yourself; Eldridge's First Law of Time-Space Integrity, as it came to be called.

Suppose this time he was in war-torn London, in 1941, as the Blitz raged about him. Again, he headed for a pub, this one situated close to St Pancras station. He walked up to the bar, bold as you like, hiding nothing.

"Good evening," said the time traveller. "I am from the future."

I was wearing orange jeans, a nylon fleece jacket, platform shoes and a "World Cup 1966" cap. Two tall men with stubble turned to look at me from a nearby table. They sported hats and long overcoats.

"Now then, young man," the older of the two said. "Let's just have a quick look at your papers, shall we?"

I smiled. "I don't have any papers, sir. When I come from, we don't need papers. Not in the sense you mean."

"Is that right?" said the second man, who was standing behind me now, between me and the door.

"That's the truth," I said. "I do, however, have a library ticket, issued in June 2005."

The older man exchanged looks with the younger man,

then both looked back at me. "In that case, sir, I think perhaps you'd better come with us."

Arrest was a step forward, obviously, in mission terms; but also a personal disappointment. "Is it true that the beer is better back now?" I asked, as they led me away. "Or is that just nostalgia?"

"I'm afraid we don't have time for a drink just at the moment, sir," said the younger man. "Maybe later."

I sat in a cell for five hours, but nobody came to see me. I had a cup of tea when they first put me in there, but after the first four-and-a-half hours I was very thirsty, and moderately hungry. I made a field assessment of the situation pertaining, and decided to give it another half hour. That having elapsed, I shrugged, sighed, and pressed the button to take me home. How the button worked needn't detain us; the mechanics of the thing are not our immediate concern.

"It's obvious," I said to Whitecoat some weeks, and several trips, later.

"What is?"

"The answer to the Second Question."

He paused in the act of changing into his cycling trousers and said, "What second question?"

"You know – the one that follows the original question: 'Where are all the time travellers?' The one that goes, 'In that case, how come I can't see them?'"

Whitecoat tested his bicycle pump against the skin of his left arm, and said: "That's the *same* sodding question, you prat."

"Well, whether it is or not—"

"It is!"

"Anyway," I continued, refusing to be sidetracked by academic pettiness, "I now have the answer to it. It's obvious! Really, we should have thought of it ages ago."

"In which case you may be certain that we did." He donned his cagoule. "Go on, but make it quick. I have a billiards match at eight, with three young women who used to be nuns."

"It's quite simple. People *do* meet time travellers, but they just don't believe it. They think the travellers are mentally ill, or possessed, or on drugs, depending on locally prevailing cultural prejudices. Or German spies. Or whatever. Or even gods. That way, you see, they are able to explain to their own satisfaction every strangeness of garb, accent, knowledge or habit displayed by the fyoocharian."

"OK," said Whitecoat, packing his flask and books into his rucksack.

"It is, I need hardly remind you," I continued, "a well-proven fact that most people will accept at least 37 patently ridiculous astonishing facts, before they will consider even *one* logically consistent astonishing fact. That, after all, is the basis of all religions, of feng shui, and of the profession of stockbroking."

Whitecoat zipped up his hood. It was a cold, windy day in early November. "You will remember about the lights, won't you? Lights cost money."

It seemed to the time traveller that Whitecoat was obsessed with the bloody lights, and how much they cost.

You'd think that a mega-agency capable of mounting humanity's first major series of experiments in time travel might be able to afford not to worry about saving a few pennies here and there by going around switching off the sodding lights like an obsessive-compulsive Dickensian skinflint. Sort of budget they must have, for heaven's sake! Still; the time traveller didn't actually have anywhere else to sleep, not at that precise moment, so he kept his thoughts to myself.

From out in the courtyard, I could hear Whitecoat unbuckling his bicycle. I leant out of an up-and-over window and called down to him. "So what do you think, then? Of my new theorem?"

"Smashing."

"Really?"

"Yes," he said. "First promulgated in the 1890s, if I remember correctly. Goodnight."

Over the course of an intensive six-month assignment, the time traveller was incarcerated in lunatic asylums and prisons in various points of history, and was on several occasions beaten quite badly by mobs or individuals who found his differentness threatening to their self-worth and/or sense of identity. If it hadn't been for the homing button (which, he knew, operated according to quanto-tantric principles, but it's not something that could be explained except to a fellow specialist), the time traveller would have been right up shit creek, and no mistake. He always took care to check and treble-check his homing button before I set off on any mission.

"There's no need to be so paranoid," said Whitecoat on one such occasion.

"Easy for you to say. It's not your nuts on the line if it goes wrong."

"It's not *going* to go wrong. It *can't* go wrong. It's only an old *button*, for God's sake!"

Such is the casual arrogance of the technician throughout the ages, safe behind his glass panel.

In London, in 1901, I distributed litho-printed flyers in libraries, clubs and theatres: "Che Guevara; Bart Simpson; The Beatles; Pele. If these names mean anything to you, please write to Post Office Box Number..."

I received no replies – no sensible replies, anyway – which meant one of two things: either there were no other travellers from the future in town that week, or else those that were around didn't read flyers.

In Paris, in 1852, I used a device secreted in my cane to scan the local populace (it doesn't matter how it worked, precisely, the mechanics of the matter are not important; let us just say that the device employed oscillating frequencies, and leave it at that, with no breach of security having occurred) and found that I was the only person within range who had been born later than 1852. I used the same device in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1965, and on that occasion the readout informed me that *no one* within range had been born later than 1965. I mentioned this anomaly to Whitecoat on my return.

"Are you sure? Give me that thing." He popped the device out of its holder, and squinted at it. "Odd," he muttered. "This isn't one of your standard props, I made this

little bugger myself." He studied the device through a lens, and twiddled at it with a screwdriver so small you could lose it in the palm of your hand. Then he held the device up to his ear and shook it. It bleeped. "There you go," he said. "Probably the battery's running down."

In the 1980s, in Tokyo, I spent a whole year (of subjective time, obviously) studying advanced mathematics, in the hope that this would give me a greater insight into our subject, and thus render me an even more supremely effective mission specialist. I found the study both enjoyable and easy; it seemed I had an aptitude for it. However, when I returned to Home Time, I could not remember a single thing I had learned.

Clearly, this was a side-effect of time travel, and I said as much to Whitecoat. He agreed.

"Yeah, *right*," he said. "Sure, *that'll* be it."

Concerned to be thorough, I returned to 1980s Tokyo. My knowledge of hideously complex maths came back to me. Back in Home Time, it abandoned me again.

"Yeah, weird," said Whitecoat, mixing a vodka cocktail in a lab glass. "But I wouldn't worry about it, Eldridge. It's not going to matter much in the long run."

Our progress at this point, it had to be admitted, was slight. The mystery remained: where were all the other time travellers? Even supposing – as I now did – that they were deliberately concealing their presence (probably in observation of Eldridge's celebrated First Law), it seemed surprising that they could do so with such complete success, when sought by an able and experienced time traveller such as myself.

"It's different universes," I said to Whitecoat one night, as I unrolled my sleeping bag, and he adjusted a dicky bow in honour of an outing to the Havana State Ballet in company with the niece of a former German ambassador to Vienna.

"You can say that again, Eldridge. You won't forget about the—"

"I mean, it's like that quantum stuff. Parallel worlds? When I go back, I'm not going *back* – I'm going sideways. Which would explain why—"

"Yes," said Whitecoat. "Amazing as it may seem, the best scientific brains of this nation, labouring in concert for these many years, have in fact come up with that one on their own account."

"Oh. Have they?"

He raised his eyebrows. "I know. Amazing, isn't it?"

"But they don't fancy it?"

He shrugged. "It may be true. Or it may not. Either way, it doesn't really matter."

I couldn't see why not. "But surely, if it explains—"

He sighed, paused in the doorway, then came over to give me a hand with the sleeping bag, which had somehow become entangled in its own drawstring. "No, you're right, Eldridge. It's a bloody good idea, and well done. But, you see, it would be impossible to prove, if true. Wouldn't it? Because the experiment and the experimenter would end up in different universes."

I thought about that, but I couldn't quite get hold of it. My head was spinning slightly, and I was short of breath, from wrestling with the sleeping bag. Then I remem-

bered something. "Idiot!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Not you, me. Waffling on about quantum universes. We already know that's not the case, don't we?"

"We do?"

"Yes! Because of that coin I hid in 1744. You remember – a 1999 ten pence piece. Which was duly recovered by the Recovery Team in Home Time. Thus demonstrating that the universe in which I hid it and the universe in which it was recovered were one and the same."

Whitecoat laughed. He laughed so much I feared for the integrity of his cummerbund. "Ah yes, the coin. Of course! Oh dear, Eldridge, how could we be so silly as to forget the legendary 1999 ten pence piece?"

"They *did* recover it, didn't they? The coin?"

"Oh yes, absolutely."

"What did they do with it?"

"Say again?"

"What did they do with the coin? Send it round to the labs, I suppose?"

That started him laughing again. He was going to have to re-do his tie in the taxi. "I really don't know. Stuck it in the meter, probably. Speaking of which..."

"I know. The lights."

"That's the ticket! Goodnight, old thing."

"Goodnight, Whitecoat. See you tomorrow."

He waved at me over his shoulder. "Looks like it."

After he'd gone, I thought about the coin; the lab boys had never examined it, that was now obvious. So much for my attempt at morale-raising humour.

The time traveller had run out of theories. That happens, you know, even to the most brilliant minds. It's an inevitability, in as much as anything can be said to be inevitable in this life.

For another week or so, the trips continued, but the time traveller was by now beginning to feel rather disconsolate. He became subject to chronic tiredness, one might even say listlessness.

One night, after a somewhat uncomfortable journey to 1462 Siberia, I accidentally ran the office microwave oven at full power, empty, for an hour, and nodded off while it burned. The smoke detector triggered an automatic alarm at the fire station, and Whitecoat was summoned to the scene as registered key-holder.

He was not as annoyed as he might have been, despite being called away in the middle of a dominoes evening at the Junior Carlton. Perhaps he had been losing. His speech was slightly slurred; in fact, it was very slurred, but slightly slurred speech is easier to render.

"I'm terribly sorry about this, Whitecoat. Look, I'll clear up here and you can—"

"Never mind, no harm done. Here, let's have a drink." He took a bottle of Scotch from a desk drawer and poured two large measures. We said Cheers, and drank. His expression, it seemed to me, contained more of pity than of anger. "I don't know if anyone has been thoughtless enough to mention this to you, Eldridge, but you are losing your hair at a simply absurd rate."

"No chance!" I said. "I'm only in my early 20s, and no

man in my family has ever suffered male pattern baldness until well into their 50s."

Whitecoat said nothing, and handed me a mirror – in which a Spam-top wearing my eyes looked back at me. "Oh my God!" I shrieked. "It's the gamma rays!"

Whitecoat clucked his tongue. "Don't be stupid, we don't *use* any gamma rays. What do you think this is, the 1950s?"

"No, no," I said, "of course I don't think it's the 1950s. I know perfectly well it's the... it's the..." My mind was wandering. Was that true, what I had just said about baldness not running in my family? I'd been orphaned at birth, hadn't I? I tried to picture my family, my childhood, my home town, but I was too tired.

Whitecoat topped up our glasses. "Look, Eldridge. I think it's time to tell you what's going on here. Yes, I do. I reckon this mission has pretty much reached its end. It's come earlier than we expected, but then what do we know?"

"Call off the mission? No, you can't do that! It hasn't yet achieved its objectives."

He chuckled. "Hasn't it, indeed?" And then he explained.

Quantum computers had made the theoretical breakthrough just a couple of years earlier. Time travel was indeed possible, they declared, but there was a catch: it could only ever be possible for *one person* in the whole history of the universe; beyond that, it would collapse under the weight of its own internal contradictions.

"Just our bad luck that that one person, that once and for all unique time traveller, happened to come along during our watch."

"Bad luck?" I said. "Why?"

Whitecoat reached over and patted me on the arm. "Look, no offence old chap, but – well, just supposing this unique individual was, let us say, a total prat. A complete divot. An arse-brain of the first water. You see? Heaven knows what mischief such a one might get up to."

I nodded. "Oh yes, I can see that. Of course, you had no way of knowing what sort of individual he might be."

Whitecoat toasted me with his glass, found it was empty, and refilled it. "There you are, you see. Knew you'd understand; nothing personal. I'm sure you have qualities of your own, deep down."

I had no idea what he meant by that, but in any case a more pressing thought had occurred to me. "You already knew the answer to the conundrum – 'Where are all the time travellers?' The answer was, there's only one of them."

"True."

"So..." I waved a hand around me, at the glass panel, the control desk, the chrono-tube.

"What was this mission all about? Yes, fair question. I shall try to answer it tactfully. The thing is, Eldridge – what's your *first* name, by the way?"

"I..." I blinked. I frowned and blinked again. Didn't help. "Look, never mind that, now!"

"Yes, right you are. Well, the finest minds of our generation – which are, needless to say, silicon ones –

revealed unto us something else, something rather significant. Namely, that even our lone time traveller would be capable of making only a limited number of journeys. The continuum, you understand, defending itself against damage."

"Ah!" I said. "Eldridge's First Law."

"What?"

"Of Time-Space Integrity."

Whitecoat rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Pour yourself another one, why don't you. So, in essence, the purpose of this mission was to *use up* the time traveller's ration of time-travelling. As soon as that was accomplished, the risk of having an undisciplined moron whizzing about the centuries causing havoc would have been abolished forever."

"I see what you mean. Lucky you got me instead, then."

"Yes..."

"How did you find me, in fact?"

"Well, obviously, we didn't know for sure whether the time traveller had been born yet. Or whether he'd died thousands of years ago. Or whether he was deep in the bowels of a secret Chinese or American laboratory. We knew by now how to build a machine to find him, by homing in on irregular chrono-blips –"

"Yes, I thought it must be something like that."

"Did you, indeed! Anyway, the cost of actually building the engine would be astronomic. In the end, though, the comet-strike view prevailed."

"Which is...?"

"That if you spend billions defending the Earth against comet strikes, and then there are no comets, questions will be asked in Parliament. On the other hand, if you *don't*, and there *are*, you end up with worse than egg on your face."

"So you built it, and you found me."

"Quite. At a cost of three pence on income tax, and the closure of 50 hospitals, but there you go."

I chewed on that for a while. "I am sorry about leaving the lights on that time."

Whitecoat clinked his glass against mine. "Not to worry. Drop in the ocean, really."

I gestured again at the machinery around us. "All this must have cost another fortune."

"Ah... well, not really. You see, Eldridge, none of this actually works. It's all just – props. Well, all except the homing system, which is little more than a sophisticated tether, and the chrono-blip detector hidden in the cane."

"But –"

"The time traveller – you, as it turns out – doesn't need any gizmos. He simply does what he does, unaided. You'd never done it before, because – well, because nobody had ever told you to do it, I suppose."

On my first day there, he'd told me that I had been selected for my brains and my bravery. I'd believed him.

"So what happens now?"

Whitecoat nodded. "It's pretty clear, from the rapidity of your hair loss and other symptoms, that you are reaching the end of your journeying allotment. We'll do a few more trips over the next day or so, just to make sure, and then – you just go home, I suppose." He sucked on a

mouthful of whisky and stared at me for a moment. "You do have a home, do you? Forgive me asking, but the location team thought you might have been sleeping rough when they found you. Your fingerprints weren't on file anywhere, and you were never able to give us any information about yourself beyond the name Eldridge."

Home? "Actually," I began, but then some instinct made me stop. "Yes, yes of course. You're right, I had been sleeping rough for a while – messy divorce, booze, you know – but I'm all right now. I'll go home, sort myself out."

"Good man. Well, you signed the Official Secrets Act when you joined up, and your story isn't one that anyone's ever going to believe, should you choose to blab it, and your time-travelling days are over, or almost, so I reckon that's about it." He yawned and stretched, like a cat. "I'll be able to get back to some proper work, with any luck. No offence, but I hope I've served my sentence in the wilderness. Honestly, a couple of drinks at an office party, a small explosion, and suddenly a chap goes from golden boy to bad boy before he has time to draw breath!"

We said goodnight, then, and shook hands. Whitecoat had never shaken my hand before. It took the drink to bring out his affable side.

The time traveller took one last trip, that same night. On his own this time, without the benefit of flashing lights or men who thought it was witty to call themselves Whitecoat. He simply *popped* himself back to 1744.

The coin I had planted then wasn't a ten pence piece from 1999. It was a two bob bit from 1959. I'd found it, lost in the lining of my trousers, on my first day at the project. Leaving it in 1744 had been just my little joke. I'd thought it might cause a few scratched heads amongst the lads in the science unit, who I'd never met – and who, I now realized, probably didn't exist – seeing a 1999 coin magically transmogrified into an old florin. That was back at the beginning, when I still thought I was part of a team.

I pocketed the money, as a sort of souvenir, and took a last look around at the past. I wouldn't be turning up for work at the project the next morning, or any morning; I felt that was the least I owed Whitecoat, the supercilious bastard. I had noted that he didn't say what, precisely, the theorists thought might happen to the time traveller once all his trips had been used up. I was not curious for an answer to that particular riddle.

I was about to press the home button, when I remembered that I didn't need such nonsense. I ground the stupid thing to dust under my heel, then closed my eyes and *popped* myself back to Home Time.

Which, it transpired, was a converted aircraft shed in deepest Dorset, full of gleaming metal and white-coated boffins.

"My God – it's Commander Eldridge! Quick, fetch the medics." One of the white-coats ran to meet me as I half stepped, half stumbled out of a glowing glass tube mounted on a platform at one end of the cavernous shed. "Where have you *been*, sir? The whole of MI5 has been

out searching for you for four days!"

I was almost too weak to speak. "Have they?"

"They have indeed. All leave cancelled – and during a Test Match, too! Not to mention this Cuban missile flap. Anyway, you're back now, Commander."

"So I am. Yes... so I am. *Commander Eldridge*, did you say?"

He helped me to a chair, while a pretty nurse in army fatigues peered at my eyeballs and then stuck a needle in my arm. "That's right, sir. Feeling a touch groggy, are we? Not surprising, really. And you've lost your hair!"

"Not all of it." Exaggeration is not a trait I admire.

"You do look a bit rough, sir, if you'll forgive me."

"I don't feel too clever, to be honest. Look, just let me check a few things, would you? The year, for a start."

"1962, sir. Here, drink this tea – you look parched."

"1962, of course. Yes." Bits and bobs were drifting back to me. I looked at the bloke in the white coat. A few years older than me, pink faced with a caterpillar moustache. "It's Peters, isn't it?"

He nodded with enthusiasm, as if I'd just said something awfully clever. "That's it, sir. Peters."

"Yes. I remember. And, Peters, what exactly have I been up to in the last four days?"

"We sent you forward in time, Commander. Mainly to see if it could be done, but also to find out–"

"The result of the Test Match?"

"Oh, rather!" Peters laughed, and his pink cheeks wobbled like jelly. The nurse scowled, and shoved a thermometer into my mouth. It takes a lot to make an army nurse laugh. "Yes, that, naturally. But also, a slightly more trivial matter, to find out whether time travel has been perfected in the future, and if so by whom."

Speaking around the thermometer, I said: "But we'd know, wouldn't we? They'd have come back to visit us?"

"I say, Commander, you *have* had a crack on the nut, haven't you?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Sir, we know for certain that people can't time travel into the *past*. Theoretical impossibility – the old Grandfather Paradox, you see. Time travel is strictly a one-way street."

"Right. Yes, of course. Sorry, Peters, I'd forgotten that for the moment. Just one more thing – how did I get chosen for this mission? I seem to be quite young to be a Commander."

"Oh, we tested thousands and thousands of lads, young recruits you know, from all the services. We told them we were researching a cure for the common cold. Tried sending them an hour forward, but for some reason, we're not sure why yet, none of them worked out. Until you!"

"Right, yes. Jolly good luck for me." It *was* coming back to me now – the luxury quarters, the officers' mess stocked with fine brandies and finer cigars.

"Good luck for everyone, sir. As it turned out, you also had a natural aptitude for maths, which has been a great help."

I remembered something else; a side-effect of time travel, which the boffins had warned of, and which I had now proven was not merely theoretical. "I say, Peters –

what's the budget like for this project? Pretty generous, is it? I mean, if a chap left a few lights on in an empty office here and there... he wouldn't get nagged about it?"

The technician looked a little concerned, peering at my face and swapping a significant glance with the nurse. Then he relaxed, and gave a beef-scented, service-issue guffaw. "Oh, Commander! You will have your little joke. But here, we'd better get you over to debrief ASAP. Speaking of which, I take it we were right about the side-effect. You do suffer some memory loss as you travel forward in time?"

"To an extent, yes, I'm afraid so. Works on the homeward trip as well, as I've ably demonstrated to you. I'm afraid the debrief might be a little... vague."

"Well, not to worry. I expect it'll all come back."

I wasn't so sure about that. I enjoyed being a time traveller. At least, I enjoyed being a Commander at age 23. It was a cushy billet; for a young lad from the wrong side of the tracks, who'd only joined up out of desperation, it provided a life undreamt of. Rank, privilege, adventure. Whatever else, the authorities must be persuaded to keep the project going – though preferably without me personally having to do any more travelling. I was pretty sure I could swing that on medical grounds.

From what Whitecoat had told me in 2005, I should have a good 40 years until the Uniqueness Principle was discovered. (Evidently, this 1962 project was so secret that the 2005 project operated in complete ignorance of its predecessor.) But even if they did eventually figure out

that I was the only potential time traveller, and I was confident that would take a few years, they could hardly take my rank away from me. I'd done my bit for Queen and country, hadn't I? I deserved the good life, I'd suffered for it, and I intended to hold onto it. Eldridge's First Law (Revised), you might say.

"Above all," Peters went on, "they're going to want to know if you have found an answer to the Second Question."

A chill ran down my spine. The phrase was uncomfortably familiar. "Second Question?"

"You must remember the Second Question, Commander. The original question of course was, 'Is time travel possible?'"

"Ah yes. And the second?"

"If it is possible, are we the first to discover it? Or has someone else got there before us?"

I smiled. This particular variation on the Second Question was one which need not cause me great concern. I'd known the answer all my life.

"Surely not," I said, finishing my tea and finger-combing what was left of my hair. "After all, if time travel already exists, one has to ask oneself – where are all the time travellers?"

Mat Coward last appeared in *Interzone* with "We All Saw It" (issue 155). He is a frequent contributor to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and other crime-fiction publications. Born 1960, he lives in Frome, Somerset.

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Paragon, this year's British Easter SF Convention, saw the usual award presentations. BSFA Awards went to Mary Gentle's *Ash: A Secret History* as best novel, Peter F. Hamilton's "The Suspect Genome" (*Interzone* 156) as short fiction, and Dominic Harman's cover painting "Hideaway" (*IZ* 157). The occasional Richard Evans Memorial Award, for writers whose critical acclaim drowns out the feeble tinkling of the cash register, was presented to Gwyneth Jones. Jay Hurst won the Paper Tiger art show award.

SECRET PLACES AND MEAN MEN

Stephen M. Baxter enjoyed my suggestion during an Eastercon discussion that the world needed The Stephen R. Baxter [*my amnesia*] Appreciation Society, with us devoted "Baxies" wearing glowing blue rings of exotic matter on our foreheads: "Speaking to me through his exotic-matter-encrusted ringpiece, the great man wishes to commend his followers for their obeisance, notes that the universe he inhabits remains a warm and fluffy place, assures us that the stump is healing nicely, thank you, and urges us always to remember: In Case Of Emergency, Break Laws Of Physics."

Peter F. Hamilton's rapture at winning a BSFA award was somewhat modified by the fact that a slightly off-sober Eric Brown rushed to phone him the news, reaching him at 11:30pm while he was still on his honeymoon...

Philip Pullman was named the British Booksellers Association's Author of the Year, "prevailing over J.K. Rowling, Jamie Oliver, Ian Rankin, Joanne Harris and Jacqueline Wilson." (*Bookseller*)

Anthony Roberts is suing Turner Prize nominee Glenn Brown for basing *The Loves of Shepherds 2000* on Roberts's 1974 cover art for *Double Star*. Chris Foss has a similar complaint about Brown "appropriating" his cover design for *Diary of a Spaceperson* (1990). A Tate spokesman had compared Brown's approach to "Constable looking at a piece of summer landscape." In other words, sf book-jacket illustrations are environment, not Art.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

More Awards. *Nebulas*. Novel: *Darwin's Radio*, Greg Bear. Novella: "Godesses," Linda Nagata. Novelette: "Daddy's World," Walter Jon Williams. Short: "macs," Terry Bisson. Script: *Galaxy Quest*. Already announced: Grand Master, Philip José Farmer. Author Emeritus (i.e. "retired," a flagrant lie), Robert Sheckley. *Philip K. Dick Award*: Michael Marshall

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Smith's *Only Forward* (1994) won as best original sf paperback published in the USA in 2000. *The Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery Award* is to be an "annual literary award for forgotten SF classics," chosen by jury.

R.I.P. Harry Secombe (1921-2001), the inimitable Neddy Seagoon of BBC Radio's much-loved *Goon Show*, died on 11 April. He was 79. **Beatrice Straight** (1916-2001), US character actress who played the paranormal investigator in *Poltergeist* (1982), has died aged 86. **Pierre Versins** (1923-2000), French sf author and scholar, died on 19 April aged 78. Pierre-Paul Durastanti writes: "Writer, faneditor, critic, and author of the *Encyclopedie des Voyages Extraordinaires, de l'Utopie et de la Science Fiction* (special Worldcon award, 1973), he died peacefully in his sleep in Avignon, France – his home town, to which he'd returned after living long years in Switzerland, where he founded the sf museum La Maison d'Ailleurs." **Judy Watson**, wife of Ian Watson, "died at home on Easter Saturday morning of heart failure due to a sudden overwhelming infectious exacerbation of emphysema from which she suffered progressively for the past few years. She bequeathed her body to the Department of Human Anatomy of the University of Oxford." (Ian Watson, to whom all sympathy.)

Bridget Jones's Diary (the movie) has a genuine sf moment, reports our film correspondent: a phone call in which BJ insightfully describes Kafka's work as "positively Vonnegutesque."

Hugo Nominations. Best Novel: *A Storm of Swords* by George R. R. Martin, *Calculating God* by Robert J. Sawyer, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* by J. K. Rowling, *Midnight Robber* by Nalo Hopkinson, *The Sky Road* by

Ken MacLeod. Oddly, this shortlist contains not one sf novel by a US author (Martin's is fantasy). The 1999 *The Sky Road* benefited from an experimental rule change allowing an extra year's eligibility to works published outside the USA. The full Hugo list goes on and on, with Greg Egan's "Oracle" (*Asimov's* 7/00) representing Australia under Novella, and unusually many British nominees... Novelette: "On the Orion Line" by Stephen Baxter (*Asimov's* 10/00). Short Story: "Different Kinds of Darkness" by David Langford (*F&SF* 1/00) and "The Gravity Mine" by Baxter again (*Asimov's* 4/00). Related Book: *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature* ed. Andrew M. Butler, Edward James & Farah Mendlesohn. Dramatic Presentation: *Chicken Run*. Pro Artist: Jim Burns. Semiprozine: *Interzone*.

Fanzine: *Plokta*. Fan Writer: me. Fan Artist: Sue Mason. John W. Campbell Award: Jo Walton, whose debut fantasy *The King's Peace* appeared in America.

As Others See Us. "Science fiction is a part of the Communist plan to dominate Western culture. Queen Elizabeth herself has been known to pen 'sci-fi' under a pseudonym." – Lyndon LaRouche (*Evening Standard* magazine, 6 April).

Retro Hugo nominations for 1950 work are too voluminous to list, but here are the novels: *The Dying Earth* by Jack Vance, *Farmer in the Sky* by Robert A. Heinlein, *First Lensman* by E. E. Smith, *Pebble in the Sky* by Isaac Asimov, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis.

Happy Media. Terry Pratchett's "Bromeliad" Trilogy (*Truckers, Diggers and Wings*) has been sold to Dream-Works for a computer-generated feature film from Andrew Adamson and Joe Stillman.

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Longevity*. "Peters, we are over a million years old!" he announced quietly. "When we were caught up in that double-sun explosion, we must have been carried along in its giddy orbit for over a million years! We were kept alive simply because we were in an air-locked compartment and did not do anything but sleep for most of the time, thus conserving our energy and our bodies to allow us to behave now as if we were normal men." (Terence Haile, *Galaxies Ahead*, 1963) *Dept of Geophysics*. "I was now aware of the detailed history of Mu, from its beginnings as a continent sucked from under the sea by a moon that hovered over it (revolving at the same speed as the earth's rotation, so that it appeared stationary)..." (Colin Wilson, *The Philosopher's Stone*, 1969) *Dept of Nebula Winners*. "Kaye could hardly stand sitting." (Greg Bear, *Darwin's Radio*, 1999)

Far Scape – Near Miss

Evelyn Lewes



Farscape: Moya, the Leviathan, a living spaceship with, inset, Pilot, her operator/symbiont

After Ben Jeapes's letter in *IZ* 167, two other people whose opinions I also respect have offered similar views of *Farscape*'s excellence – the characters make mistakes, and suffer, and learn, and grow. Well, maybe. I haven't seen an entire series yet, but what I have seen so far has done little to make me revise my first opinion. However, I am still watching, and will report back. Meantime, let's examine what we've gathered so far.

First of all, there is the setting. John Crichton is a near-future human astronaut who has somehow travelled through a wormhole into the far future. The opening sequence gives a rather mangled voice-over where he appears to be giving out a distress call, although it sounds more like a complaint, that he is trapped on a living spaceship with a bunch of weirdoes being pursued by a mad policeman. As far as I can make out, this is because all of them except Crichton are fugitives from justice as represented by The Peacekeepers, a stereotypical fascistic military/police organization, but Crichton is also on the run from them because Scorpius, mad policeman/inventor, thinks that the secret of wormhole technology is hidden in Crichton's brain.

In the short time I have been watching the show I have twice heard the sentiment expressed that they should find out where Scorpius is and get as far away from him as they can. Well excuse me for expecting some high moral purpose, but while this is a perfectly sound thing for a bunch of renegades to do, it doesn't really make for very focused televisual story-telling. Indeed, I am reminded of nothing so much as the execrable *Blake's Seven*,

where another bunch of renegades ran around the galaxy aimlessly in a stolen spaceship.

What do I expect from a sci-fi show? Well, a moral centre isn't too much to ask is it? To be fair, it does seem that difficult moral choices have to be faced in *Farscape*, but with no hierarchical organization, the moral failings of the various characters lead to a tremendous amount of bickering in the process – and when the characters aren't bickering, they are usually either shouting or screaming, being overbearing or being tortured. Of course, as David Pringle has pointed out in the past, the biggest failing of most British television science fiction is that bickering is used as a substitute for characterization. From the otherwise excellent *Survivors* to the recent *The Last Train* (currently reshowing on ITV2), this failing is always present – although *Dr Who* largely seems to have escaped the curse.

Of course, *Farscape* isn't British. I was rather peeved at first when I thought that in the usual Hollywood manner the bad guys were all given English accents, with d'Argo being given the gravelly American warrior accent, and Crichton having the perfect mid-Atlantic drawl. But in the very first episode I watched properly, I heard the welcome twang of Melbourne in the voice of one of the guest actors, then noticed Antipodean overtones in other actors' voices, and realized that the show appears to originate in Australia. This probably accounts for the Britishness described above, but the show is at least part-American produced as well, and I don't think they have fully established

a mid-Pacific character yet – which is a shame, because other Australian sf television programmes I have seen (mostly for children) have been excellent. It is possible that *Farscape* will rise to this standard, but not on the evidence of what I have seen so far.

My second gripe is with the characters themselves. In a blatant attempt to move away from the standard *Star Trek* human-crew-with-token-other-species, the majority of the crew here are other species, with only a couple of token humans. One, Aeryn Sun, is a contemporary woman who used to be a Peacekeeper, and the other is Crichton, our remarkably well-adapted American-from-the-past.

Many years ago, before I settled with my better half, I had a significant other who was a great fan of the comic *Elf Quest*. I was happily following this through umpteen issues, enjoying the adventures of the animé-type elves with their big eyes and prehensile hair, when human beings were introduced, and suddenly my reading was all cock-eyed. I had been happily identifying with the elves and their travails, and now I found that they weren't metaphors for people at all, but an entirely alien race many of whose problems were caused by human beings, and my reader's point-of-view was suddenly radically altered. Unable to reorganize everything in my mind to accommodate this new viewpoint, I couldn't be bothered to go back and start again, so I lost interest, and never did finish the story. Wendy Pini lost a reader, but more importantly, I learned that, because I am human and I identify with the characters in a story, all



story-telling is human-focused. The great joy of science fiction is the encounter with the new, the strange, the alien, and the solving of the problems that arise from this encounter. The best episodes of *Star Trek* in all its manifestations occur when this is the central theme, and the worst sort of science fiction is where it is totally ignored, and human characteristics are layered over nominally alien forms.

And what do we find in *Farscape*? Well, there is Pa'u Zoton Zhaan, played by Virginia Hey, a blue vegetable priestess of some sort, although unmistakably formed in the shape of a (rather beautiful) bald human woman. Unsurprisingly, she has a great understanding of herbs and herbalism, so she acts as ship's doctor (although how she understands how herbs affect meat people is never satisfactorily explained).

Then there is d'Argo (or it might be D'argo – it would help if they put the names in the credits), a mighty warrior with tattooed tentacles for hair, eyebrows and chin, accompanied by riotous beard hair and braids, and a magnificent teak nose. He wears all-concealing clothes, and has a whip-like tongue that he can use to knock people out (I was reminded irresistibly of Zorro). It's amazing Anthony Simcoe can act at all under that lot – all that can be seen are his lips and his eyes.

Chiana, played by Gigi Edgley, is the seemingly *de rigeur* rag-doll gorgeous young female, and in looks oddly reminiscent of Pris in *Bladerunner*. A shock of white hair combined with black contact lenses, white make-up and very dark lipstick combine to make her the most visually striking of the crew. She is self-reliant, but also self-obsessed, and I still haven't been able to work out why she is there. And that's it for the mobile crew. Now we come to the real dillies.

Farscape has been characterized, perhaps a little unfairly, as Muppets in Space; but there is a grain of truth there. Anything with the Henson name on it was bound to feature puppetry, wasn't it? But while this probably accounts for the decision to make two of the lead characters puppets, it doesn't excuse it.

Don't get me wrong. I was a fan of *The Muppet Show* from the very first. Jim Henson's Kermit and Frank Oz's Fozzie Bear were great favourites; but every one of those characters came to life on the screen. This is because they were built on visual stereotypes. The puppet was a visual key, and the more subtle information came via the soundtrack. There was no attempt to give the puppets more than the crudest of visual acting roles. So it came as a shock to see, in *The Empire Strikes Back*, a large amount of screen time given to lingering close-ups of Yoda (voiced by Frank Oz, Mr Fozzie Bear himself) and his "subtle" facial reactions to Luke Skywalker's crassness. And here, in *Farscape*, we find the same idiocy with Rygel, 16th emperor of that name and sometime ruler of untold billions, a two-foot high, frog-mouthed, articulate-eyebrow/eared manifestation of all the unpleasantness that his late-Empire cut-glass English accent can convey (reminiscent of Mr Smith in *Lost in Space*) being given as much screen time as the other characters for his facial expressions. Say it with me – puh-lease!

Likewise, Pilot, symbiotically merged with Moya, the ship, is a very large puppet, again with articulated eyebrows, and doleful eyes, whose mouth nevertheless fails to move in sync with the voice it is supposed to be producing.

The final problem with the humans in *Elf Quest* all those years ago was that they weren't actually very interesting. Wendy Pini was plainly much more fascinated by drawing her elves, and the humans paled into insignificance next to them. Likewise, in *Farscape*, the makers appear to have become so intoxicated with manufacturing intricate other species that they have lost sight of the importance to the audience of the two central human characters, who thus appear insignificant next to their exotic shipmates. Nor is this effect ameliorated by the peculiarly flat English accent of Claudia Black playing Aerin Sun. Her utterances have a dying fall similar to, but not as pronounced as, the languid tones of Drusilla, Spike's squeeze, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. At first I

thought she couldn't act; but then I realized that it is this peculiar accent that drains the feeling from her speech. Claudia Black has a warm contralto voice, so this is a great shame.

But overshadowing even this is Ben Browder's performance as Crichton. One is never sure of motivation in science fiction on television, but he seems to spend an inordinate amount of time just wandering around the ship, encountering the other characters almost at random. And when he does get into a meaningful conversation, the effect is totally ruined by an apparently unconscious habit of looking as if he is trying his best not to laugh all the time.

Now I've just finished watching an episode where Chiana finds an old recording lying around that shows that Pilot is not the original Pilot of Moya, but was drafted in to replace the previous Pilot who was murdered in place by the Peacekeepers. One of the murdering Peacekeepers is Aerin Sun. Everyone looks thoroughly perplexed at how to feel about this, and Chiana says, in a rare display of good sense in any such programme, that they can't be surprised, as Aerin is a reformed Peacekeeper. Before she was reformed, she must have done nasty things, or she wouldn't have been able to reform. This was just one of them.

It turns out that Pilot craved the symbiosis, so connived at the previous pilot's death; and I started to get that *déjà vu* feeling – hadn't I seen a story similar to this in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, when the Dax symbiont was briefly given an unsuitable host, and Jadzia spent the whole episode discovering this and coming to terms with the unpleasant things done at that time? There hasn't been a storyline yet (in my admittedly limited exposure) that hasn't reminded me strongly of something else, and this is probably my deepest reservation about the series. It is lavishly done, with wonderful special effects, a refreshingly un-American cast for the most part, and we all desperately want it to succeed, if only to give us something worthy as an alternative to the never-ending *Star Trek* clones. Sadly, it's not there yet, but I'll keep watching the skies...



The other challenger for *Star Trek*'s pre-eminence has long been *Babylon 5*, which began a run from the beginning soon after we got our connection to the *Sci-Fi Channel*. I have been assiduously taping it, but have found no time to watch it until recently. However, Bank Holiday Monday offered the opportunity to see "all four *Babylon 5* movies back-to-back" in a promotion, bizarrely, for the movie *Red Planet*, "available to rent or buy on DVD or to rent on video from May 28." Well, I recorded them all, and watched the first two, "In the Beginning" and "Thirdspace" before the champagne bonhomie wore off and better half started to complain.

Now *Babylon 5* suffers from the same complaint as *Farscape* but in spades, in that it is so peopled with exotic other species that the human beings fade into the background. But what little that I have seen so far reveals far more egregious faults.

The first of these "films," "In the Beginning," has the major Centauri character in the future as Centauri Emperor encountering two children at play who look out of the window to see the city in flames. He tells the children the story of the war between the Humans and the Mimbari and how he had a tragic influence on events. Now, apart from the cosy scenes with elderly Centauri telling a story to two charming children and their beautiful-but-bald (again!) nanny while the planet burns, much of the action of the film is either men behaving boorishly, Mimbari behaving incomprehensibly in the face of apparent human truculence (despite being a most advanced and ancient race), or space battles with lots of ships blowing up.

The Mimbari wage a genocidal war against the humans, and have almost succeeded when they discover humans have souls too, and surrender unconditionally. Now while I look for the strange and mysterious in science fiction, here all I see that is strange is a chain of illogic. People, whether human or alien, do things that don't make any sense except in terms of moving the plot forward so that the Mimbari surrender is no more implausible than the human expansion in

their direction against massive advice in the first place.

A sure sign of such slack plotting is ungrammatical or illogical writing, and it is significant that all the episodes of *Babylon 5* that I have seen were written by J. Michael Straczynski (I believe all episodes were written by him, but have no way of checking at the moment) who seems to be the source of the kind of mangled American English that the new President of the USA is becoming renowned for.

For examples we need look no further than the introduction that precedes every episode. *Babylon 5*, we are told, exists as a place where "humans and aliens" can co-exist. The word "alien" is a loaded boo-word. If this were *Star Trek*, this would have been very carefully reworded to, at the very least, "humans and other races", but far more probably to "various space-faring races." For gossake, they're trying to prevent another war; but the attitude of the writer is plain.

And then the voiceover tells us that *Babylon 5* is "the last best hope" for peace. This is meaningless management mumbo-jumbo, and shouldn't have been allowed out of its kennel. Because it is barking. Anyone who can't see the essential fatuousness of a phrase such as "last best" deserves to be forever condemned to watching this kind of tosh. Sorry, I got carried away there. But the second film I watched ended up with a big space battle where annihilation was near and yet at the end someone says "we all got through this." I thought I'd seen loads of spaceships blowing up. And today I watched a supremely uninteresting episode where two Narns were fighting like schoolboys in a playground to see who'd be leader of the gang. Is it too much to hope that races who have managed to haul themselves up by their own bootstraps to the stars might have achieved a little bit of moral uplift as well? If *Star Trek* has one aspect that recommends it over these other programmes, it is the higher moral purpose it espouses. And perhaps therein they might find a sense of wonder – something that is sadly lacking in these otherwise worthy pretenders to *Star Trek*'s pole position.

If sense of wonder is what you're looking for, you could do worse than look outside the genre. Stephen Poliakoff has established a rare reputation as a playwright, and last year's *Shooting the Past* rightly garnered all kinds of plaudits. So this year's *Perfect Strangers* (BBC2) was much anticipated, and while not as perfect as *Shooting the Past*, it still knocks *Babylon 5* and *Farscape* into a cocked hat.

Over three episodes, Poliakoff recounts a family "reunion." The family genealogist offers the opinion that if you get all members of a family together, you will find they have at least three great stories between them – then Poliakoff proceeds to tell these three stories. I put "reunion" in quotes because the central character thinks he has never met any of these people before; his father was estranged, and there has been no contact for some time. So we have a classic stranger in a strange land finding his way where everything is new, which is exactly what one would expect of Crichton in *Farscape*, but which is so sadly lacking there.

From the story of the two feral girls living wild in the woods for years during the Second World War to the discovery of our hero that he himself was once offered as a love token by his grandfather to his lover, the whole matrix of stories is recounted via photographic prints, and Poliakoff's master stroke is to intercut the still black-and-white photographs with related live-action colour from the period, and modern televisual scenes that are so stunningly still that they become a further series of magical snapshots in the memory. Poliakoff has evoked this kind of sense of wonder in almost every production I have seen of his, and it is sad that the meticulous craftsmanship that he displays in creating his dramas is only reflected in the likes of *Farscape* and *Babylon 5* in their set-dressing and make-up. If they could even approach his depth of character and the magical strangenesses that he conjures from the slightest of occurrences, then we would at last have a television of the fantastic capable of matching or even surpassing the best that *Star Trek* has offered.

Evelyn Lewes

Interaction

Readers letters – continued from page 5

comment. Evelyn Lewes's frequent comments on the physical appearance of the women she was discussing (and especially the fairly informal language she used: "drop-dead gorgeous"; "she's a pretty enough little thing"; "all natural curves and the prettiest smile") did lend her article a faint whiff of air-head bimboism, so I can see where his remark came from but he should still have rejected it.

I enjoyed much of "Calling All Angels" but found it very frustrating. Just what was it trying to do? I couldn't work out what the article was about. At one point near the end Ms Lewes refers to it as "a discourse on women in fantasy with super-powers," which would seem to rule out most of the characters she discusses. Nowhere was there any statement of purpose as clear as that which she offered at the start of her reply to Mr Jeapes: "an overview that introduced attitudes... to explore in depth [later]" and "a very broad overview of what has been happening since television was last examined in *Interzone*." Fair enough, except that at the end of her letter she says her article "was written specifically to explore the use of strong women characters in television fiction."

I'm guessing that really means "television sf," although even then Ms Lewes seems to want to cover "fantastic fiction" so that *Buffy* and *Charmed* can be included, and even the definition of "fantastic fiction" has to be stretched to breaking point to allow inclusion of *Ally McBeal* and *Suddenly Susan*.

For an overview article (very broad or otherwise), ignoring *Babylon 5* and the spinoff series *Crusade* seems an odd strategy. *Babylon 5*, whatever you feel about its strengths and weaknesses, made a point of featuring strong women characters among both the regular and non-recurring cast. (An aside: *Babylon 5* had probably the highest production values of any sf TV series in living memory; sadly, it didn't always have the production budget to match its aspirations.) In her reply to Mr Jeapes, Ms Lewes says she has to be "ruthless in choosing what to watch." Again, fair enough, but if you intend to write an overview for an IZ readership, choosing *Charmed* over *Stargate SG-1* requires further explanation.

(Another aside: Ms Lewes dismisses Mr Jeapes' remark about women characters having a boy's name far too quickly. The strong woman in *Stargate* is called "Sam," for example. Despite Ms Lewes's protestations, Sam and Max are likely to have initially male connotations for listeners of any gender, with the converse for Evelyn. And this boy's-name thing is very common

in US TV and Hollywood/mainstream cinema. I would have said it's a way of trying to make strong women seem less threatening to male viewers, rather than make them appear tougher.)

There appears to be little or no consideration of the "quality" of the series being examined. Reasonable enough if the article is mainly looking for the presence or absence of particular characters. But then we get several column inches about "lasting mass appeal" which seem to relate the quality of a show to the channel which acquires the re-runs: *Babylon 5* and *Farscape* ending up with the dregs and the duff on the Sci-Fi Channel. (Along with *Twin Peaks* and *The Prisoner*, two more shows of presumably insignificant merit.) Oh, and then we have lots of special pleading on behalf of *Suddenly Susan*, a show which is apparently "good" even though it hasn't been well treated by UK TV schedulers (the vagaries of whom are decried at some length along with the hassles of setting a video timer. Say it with me: *Puh-lease!*).

All the more strange, then, that *Heathers* is offered up as a "landmark movie." Yes, it probably was in some respects, but it was a critical rather than commercial success and is shown on Channel 4 or BBC 2 rather than any of the mass appeal terrestrial channels. I think *Babylon 5* is a landmark series, even if it isn't endlessly re-cycled on Sky One. Clearly, Ms Lewes doesn't: "Next, [Jeapes] will be demanding that I take *Babylon 5* seriously, when it suffers from even worse production values." By that argument we would be spared from having to discuss the significance of *Doctor Who* in the development of sf on television. Whether Ms Lewes likes a particular show or not is up to her; to exclude it from an overview by simply calling it a "mega-disappointment" strikes me as insufficient. I've never watched an episode of *Farscape* or *Lexx* but I would expect *Interzone* to discuss them seriously.

Sorry to dwell at such length on things I was unhappy about. Let me repeat that I enjoyed much of what was in the article; my criticisms are mostly to do with what was absent. I hope we'll have the chance to read more of Ms Lewes's observations, but hopefully with a clearer editorial mandate in the future.

Alasdair Montgomery

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Dear Editors:

Catching up with my reading I have just begun flicking through the March issue and happened to light upon Evelyn Lewes's article "Calling All Angels." I try very hard not to get irate with poor writing and terrible argument but

this article is beyond a joke. To begin with, Lewes makes very dubious assertions of quality, *Babylon 5* was a recent "mega-disappointment." I can live with that: it seems to ignore the show's huge popularity, but as far as taste goes, each to their own. But when Lewes asserts that its poor quality is testified to by its failure to achieve a rerun on a "quality" channel such as "one of the BBCs, Channel 4 or Sky 1" I begin to wonder about the credibility of the article. *Babylon 5* was rerun by Channel 4.

One mistake is one mistake, but this article is so full of grammatical errors as to be almost unreadable. A number of sentences are incomplete and stylistically this is just appalling and horribly reminiscent of the work of my weakest students. To give just a few examples: "Needless to say, *Star Trek* and the other Roddenberry projects have thus far avoided this fate...", the style is over blown and full of redundancies. Or another: "And it is equally noticeable that with the current crop, while there is a man, he is emasculated in some way, and can't come to the rescue...", a horribly flabby construction. In the section on *Dark Angel* the word "future" is repeated three times in the second sentence. I could go on but I won't.

Please, if you must publish such flimsy and insubstantial criticism, at least edit it to tighten up the style. I expect, and usually get, much better from *Interzone*.

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The Science Fiction Foundation

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Evelyn Lewes responds:

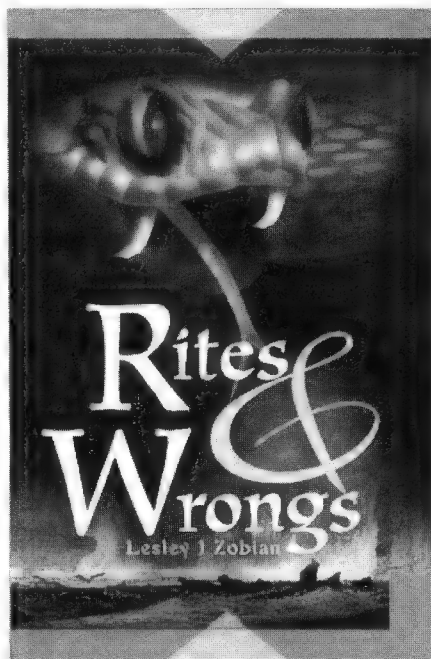
It is gratifying that so many people have taken the time to comment on my column and many of their points are well taken. Certainly, much was missed in my attempt to combine a review of Dark Angel with a ground-laying overview of recent fantastic fiction on television. I offer as a reason but not an excuse that the article could have been twice the length and still have overlooked someone's favourite programme, but that in order to give notice to two significant new television sf series (Dark Angel and Andromeda) it was necessary to begin somewhere.

We were founder subscribers to the Sci-Fi Channel when it launched in this country, but withdrew because it broadcast such rubbish. Reconnecting recently has revealed it has improved, and I have been taking the opportunity to catch up on Babylon 5 and Farscape – in fact another column treating of them is in this issue. Farah Mendlesohn's comments on my prose are ironic considering my comments on B5 therein. In attempting a chatty style, perhaps I have become too demotic. Must try harder. Sorry.

Though it's the reviewer's chief joy to encounter something original in concept, grand in design, complex in construction and flawless in execution, it's nonetheless pleasurable (and a lot less wearing) to meet the sort of traditional, simple and unpretentious item I tend to call a romp.

One such is *Rites and Wrongs* (Writers Club Press, \$13.95, C-format) by Lesley J. Zobian. It's based on the conceit that a god's powers (and status among his fellow gods) are contingent on the number and enthusiasm of his worshippers – which makes for an insecure eternity, mortals being fickle in their spiritual allegiances. Such is the problem confronting the demi-god Banish (so called because of the number of times he has been exorcised by missionaries of ascetic disposition). Banish is an unmitigated sex-god, without even the excuse that he concerns himself much with fertility or the performing arts, and on Earth religious orgies are out of fashion. He therefore attempts to set up shop on the kind of Sword & Sorcery world that will be immediately familiar to admirers of the Lankhmar books and the works of Sprague de Camp, Tom Holt, Craig Shaw Gardner etc.

There he gathers the nucleus of a congregation: an obese, greedy, cheese-paring merchant; his adoring slave; and two cynical bravos who describe themselves as poet and minstrel but are more often employed as swords-for-hire, and from whose viewpoints most of the story is told. The story, such as it is, is driven largely by the venality, vanity, gullibility and sexual opportunism of most of the characters, plus the unwillingness of the local gods to have Banish usurp their territory; the humour, though delivered with panache, is of a pre-



Some Romps

Chris Gilmore

dictably schoolboyish kind.

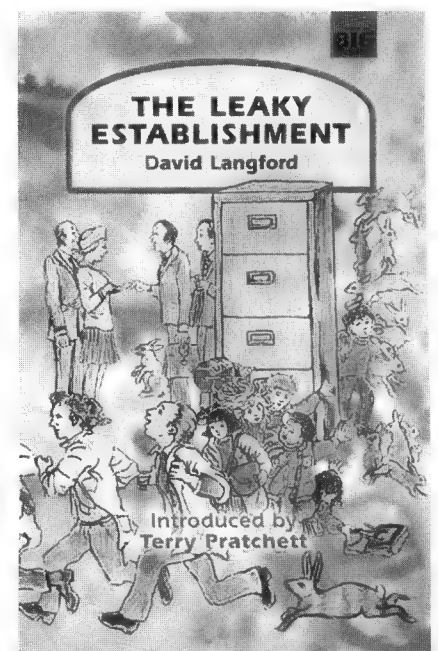
So is it on a par with the best of Leiber and Holt? No, not quite. Zobian's louche bravos are less well differentiated than the Grey Mouser and Fahrd, and her jokes are just as off-colour, but less learned than Holt's. I've seen better proof-reading as well, but this is an enjoyable, undemanding romp by any reasonable standards. Moreover, it's a first novel, and reads like the first of a series; there may well be more and better to come, and they need get only marginally better to be very good indeed.

It's an old joke in the nuclear industry that if you fling a lump of granite over the fence surrounding a site you are either: a concerned citizen, symbolically expressing your just outrage against those who would poison Planet Earth and all who live thereon for a quick buck; or a psychopathic but mealy-mouthed lout, gratifying your passion for violence under the threadbare aegis of a bogus cause. These positions are not easily reconciled, but if a site-worker flings it back, the case is a lot simpler. He is guilty of removing from the site an item of intermediate-level waste, without proper documentation or adequate shielding.

David Langford's *The Leaky Establishment* (Big Engine, £7.99) is in essence a reverse variant of this joke: if, as an employee on the site, you have inadvertently smuggled out something seriously dangerous, how do you get it back in – given that you daren't confess how you got it out in the first place? The book was first published in 1984, and reviewed by Mary Gentle in *Interzone* 11, though in truth it wasn't sf them, and isn't fantasy now. It's a humorous caper novel, though the cen-

tral character's technical criminality is forced on him by ill luck, and satirizes the mixture of pomposity, ineptitude, eccentricity and wry fatalism with which England confronted the realities of the post-war era.

As I write this, there has just been published a set of contingency plans drafted by the Home Office at the height of the Cold War, to be put into effect should London be simultaneously hit by up to four atomic bombs. They include the requirement that all government offices should be prepared to hand out cups of tea gratis to those injured and/or made homeless by the detonations. It notes that all such offices should therefore carry stocks of tea sufficient to meet the anticipated demand, and expresses satisfaction



that indeed, they all do. In the light of this, it's difficult to counter Langford's assertion (backed up by Terry Pratchett in his introduction) that the nuclear program was carried on in the atmosphere of total unreality here described.

Yet, however closely life emulates art, the best art tends to win on structural points. So it is here. While *The Leaky Establishment* is essentially a hybrid between the affectionate satire and the caper novel, it is also a mystery novel of an unusual, possibly unique, type. We aren't even favoured with hints that the mystery exists until the last chapter, where it emerges as a *deus ex machina* and resolves the main plot by swallowing the McGuffin whole; yet in retrospect, clues as to the nature of the mystery are scattered throughout the early pages. It makes for an excellently satisfactory ending; warmly recommended.

Reviewing David Gemmell's *Midnight Falcon* in *Interzone* 149, I deplored his idiot-plotting, and noted his need for a new direction. It's my pleasure to report that in *Ravenheart* (Bantam Press, £16.99; Del Rey, \$24.95) there is only one instance of idiot-plotting, and he has branched out, if only modestly. As he retains all his virtues as a writer (and has reined in some of his vices) the marginal improvements add up to a much better book, but one which will inflict no difficulty on his admirers. These will note and approve in particular his habit of acknowledging the potential virtue of bad men, and regretting its loss no less than the blighted or thwarted virtues of their victims.

His new direction is to use an analogue of 17th/18th-century Scotland as

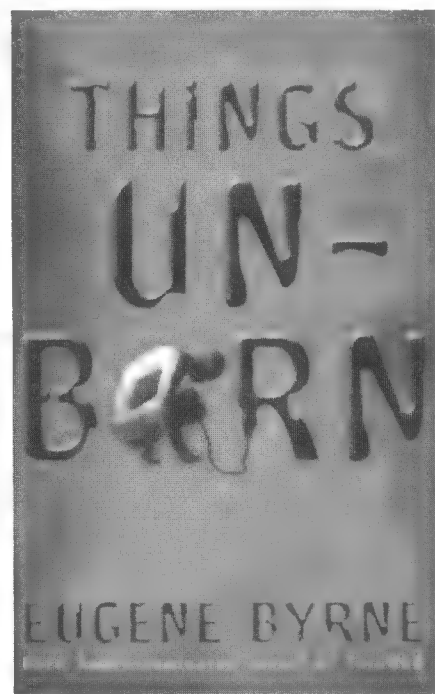
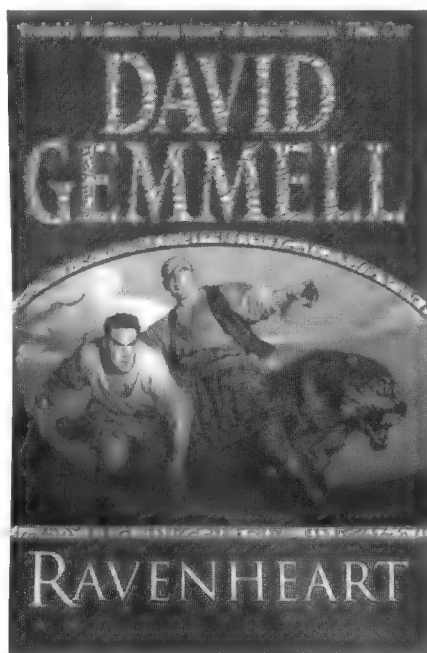
his setting, without tying it down too closely to any specific campaign. Kilts are worn, *uisge* is drunk, muzzle-loading firearms are discharged in cold blood and hot, cattle-stealing is the national vice if not the national sport, the Rigante clan has been forced to change its name and suppress its colours (as happened to the M'Gregors), and one fears the Massacre of Glencoe may be re-enacted at any moment. Gemmell even lifts Montrose's famous quatrain (without acknowledgement) and attributes it to one of his own characters. Against this background he offers a satisfying if at times rather excessive *Bildungsroman*.

Kaelin Ring, the posthumous son of a Rigante hero, is far from pleased to be growing up as the scion of a despised and defeated people, his home village being essentially occupied territory. But things could be worse; his Aunt Maev is rich and resourceful; his schoolmaster is stern but dedicated; his uncle-by-courtesy is the best fighting man in the country; the local witch-woman foresees great things for him, if he can avoid getting killed or corrupted; and he himself has all the attributes we seven-stone weaklings traditionally admire and envy.

Naturally, he arouses the interest of the local girls; naturally, that arouses the hatred of less worthy rivals. By the end of the book Kaelin is still only 15 and a virgin, but already a seasoned commander of irregular troops; two potential girlfriends have been raped on his account (one murdered), but he has avenged both; and Gemmell has introduced us to a number of potential friends and enemies for later volumes. For unlike *Midnight Falcon*, this book has all the mark of Volume One of at least three, and its foundations look secure enough to support the structure. I look forward to the next, but I remind Gemmell that though it represents a massive improvement, he has not completely subdued all his bad habits. If I were the hard-bitten and resourceful commander of a garrison holding unfriendly territory, and wished to recapture a man of formidable courage and resource, I would not delegate that task to a lone man whom I knew for a fool and a coward, even if he were an expert tracker. And if I were editing for an imprint with the status of Bantam Press/Transworld, I would not allow such a sentence as, "As tall as a horse, black as a raven's wing, the enormous beast stood in the paddock like an enormous statue cast from coal," see print. Ah, the lost art of casting coal! Perhaps I should apply to the Leisure & Amenities Committee of my local authority for an enormous grant to revive it, and teach it over a ten-week course on Thursday nights in some school or other – or perhaps I should stick to editing.

Finally, another odd hybrid. Eugene Byrne's *Things Unborn* (Earthlight, £6.99) is, in its first aspect, a standard alternate world, the branch-point in this case being 1962 when the Cuban Missile Crisis went nuclear, with widespread devastation to Britain, Europe and the eastern US. In its second, he presents a variant on Philip José Farmer's Riverworld books. In the nuclear-devastated countries, anyone who died before the war and below the age of 55, whether by violent or natural causes, is apt to reappear – mother naked, but cured of all ills – usually at or very near to his deathplace.

Why? How? Byrne offers no clues at all, being more interested in how people interact. As the year is 2008 and "retreads" have been turning up for over four decades (with no pattern whatever to the reappearances) a person's present age, archaism, and experience of the current era have no bearing on each other; on the other hand, their hang-ups, especially their religious hang-ups, are highly relevant – especially in England, where most retreads can be fitted into a two-by-two matrix. They are either Catholic or Protestant, and they believe their resurrection to be: either a reward for past virtue, and an opportunity for further virtuous acts; or a second chance to be virtuous, despite certain shortfalls in that department last time round. Since to many Prods the most satisfying expression of heroic virtue is to kill a few Papists, and since all pre-Reformation Christian retreads are Papists by definition, feelings tend to run high – the more so as, the House of Windsor having been wiped out in the War, the current occupant of the throne is



the retread King Richard III (and I of Scotland), who has seen off challenges from Charles I and William Rufus, but has yet to square accounts with Edward V (whose advent is eagerly awaited by many in Fleet Street and elsewhere, as are those of Anne Boleyn and Mary, Queen of Scots).

Who'd be a copper in such a world? Well, Guy Bosworth, Hurricane pilot

killed in the Battle of Britain, now in need of a job. Also Scipio Africanus, a black slave who died young but from natural causes in the 18th century, and is now a middle-aged detective inspector. The story is essentially a political thriller, told from sundry viewpoints of which theirs are the most important. As such it works well enough (though the dialogue smells of

the lamp in places), but it reads very much like the first shot in a long, open-ended series – which will presumably culminate in a rationale for the resurrections. I look forward to more. Byrne is a proficient writer if no great stylist, his characters are deftly realized, and most of his jokes work. Good value at the price.

Chris Gilmore

With *Tales From Earthsea* (Harcourt, \$24), her elegant and affecting new collection, Ursula K. Le Guin continues a project of rare fascination: the comprehensive rewriting of her own oeuvre. It can be argued that virtually all the sf and fantasy Le Guin has published in the last eleven years – beginning with *Tehanu* (1990), the so-called *Last Book of Earthsea* – has consisted of recapitulations of her great books of the 1960s and '70s, attempts to adjust their premises and aesthetics in the direction of the radical feminism and environmentalism that have increasingly animated their author. From this perspective, belated additions to the "Hainish" cycle are revisions as much as they are original works: the "churten" stories in *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea* (1994) add a new gloss to *The Dispossessed* (1974), and *The Telling* (2000) is a distanced take on the core ideological matters of *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). Perhaps *Four Ways to Forgiveness* (1995) is a more nuanced version of *The Word for World is Forest* (1977). But particular certainty attends the later Earthsea books. They are a world remapped, Le Guin's Archipelago rebuilt from its chthonic roots upward. This fact is explicit, and its implications are exhilarating.

Tehanu was content to be a sequel to the Earthsea Trilogy, the shimmering tapestry of magic and medievalism that, appearing between 1968 and 1973, quickly established itself as a key and classic work of fantasy and children's fiction. As such, *Tehanu* irritated a good many readers, obtruding the domestic travails and mundane narrative stance of mere *women* upon the elevated mythic lyricism of its great precursor. This was a refreshing shock for others, however, new light on the frail humanity of the Archmage Ged and a necessary revelation of Earthsea's status as a place with the texture, the difficult habitability, of reality. With this didactic counterpoint, Le Guin thought to have completed her project, her feminist capstone mutating archetypal trilogy into recompllicated quartet; but as her Foreword to *Tales From Earthsea* explains, an author continues to develop, and her imagined settings with her. And so a fifth volume, some way superior to *Tehanu*, was conceived, and serves itself as a bridge to

Revisions, Previsions

Nick Gevers

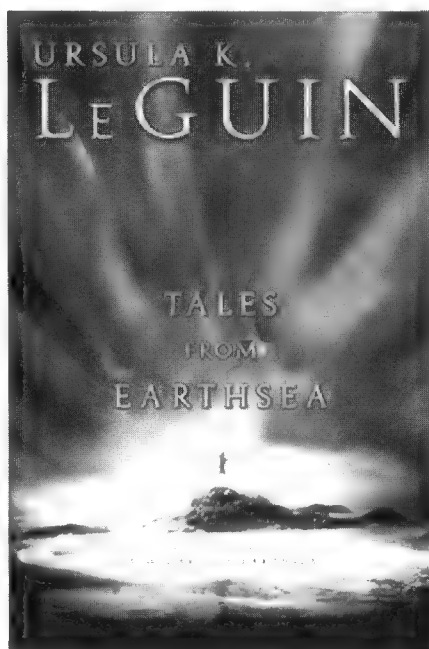
a potentially final novel, *The Other Wind*, due out later in 2001.

A transitional work or not, *Tales From Earthsea* is superb, its author's finest work in some years. It unfolds and extends the sequence, interpolating new feminist episodes into the pre-existing background, and rendering the history of Earthsea a series of premonitions of an ultimate harmony of men with women, of the dissolution of patriarchy into the true mutual mar-

riage of yang with yin. *Tales* is a book of reconciliations, not least of the styles of its predecessors, which – the majestic epic of the trilogy and the unadorned immediacy of *Tehanu* – interweave now with attractive ease; and the structure of these reconciliations is especially elegant. A short story acts as a still centre to *Tales*, a quiet orchestration of its themes; this is girded about with two novelettes, personal variations on those themes; and these are flanked by two novellas, large-scale integrations of the themes into the greater fabric of Earthsea, its history before and after the quartet. In this light, *Tales* is like a textual mandala, its meaning radiating outwards from its heart with sublime inevitability; this is magnificent literary architecture indeed.

The short story in the middle of things is "The Bones of the Earth," a tantalizing look at the origins of Ogion, Ged's wizardly mentor. Ogion must collaborate with his own teacher, Dulse, in the prevention of an earthquake on the isle of Gont; but they must sacrifice any conventional disdain for female magic to attain their end; and their task amounts to propitiation of the earth, the mother soil and bedrock that is the restless foundation for their masculine pretensions. Redesign of the landscape is a fitting metaphor for Le Guin's own authorial strategy: the surrounding novelettes relate cases of patriarchal abdication, outward ripples of disturbance through Earthsea's former feudal serenity. "Darkrose and Diamond" concerns a potential mage who abandons wizardly power and mercantile influence for the sake of love and music; and "On the High Marsh" is the story of a consumingly egotistical magician, who, defeated and driven into exile by Ged, finds humility and happiness in obscurity and the company of a middle-aged woman.

From these private episodes, the ripples become tidal waves of redemptive transformation. The novella "The Finder" asserts a secret history long preceding the events in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the suppressed truth that the Roke School, Earthsea's hallowed citadel of exclusively masculine theurgic teaching, was in fact founded by women to counter the depredations of warlords and pirates, and only with time slipped into patriarchy. And the



concluding short novel, "Dragonfly," moves into the period after *Tehanu*, implying very strongly that the rapprochement of humankind with the dangerous dragons of Earthsea depends on the prior opening of Roke School and its strategic outlook to women and the different magic they can wield. "The Finder" and "Dragonfly" link arms across the centuries and the covers of *Tales From Earthsea*, and the critical shape of Le Guin's secondary world is fast altering, a metamorphosis surely to climax in *The Other Wind*.

Tales From Earthsea has a thrilling quality, a sense that one of the greatest writers of speculative fiction has at last accomplished an inner and creative reconciliation, between her early sweeping brilliance and her subsequent reflective maturity. A text of great beauty results; and with the addition of a 30-page ethnographic "Description of Earthsea" and revised maps of the Archipelago, fresh colour and comprehensiveness are in attendance also. *Tales* is a new window on an ocean of meaning and story. Open it, and magewinds, winds of wisdom, blow through that, however changed and changing, are near as potent as when Ged was young.

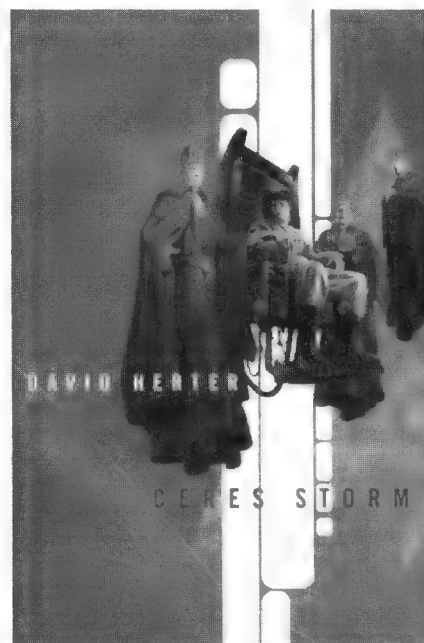
A rather different sort of career retrospection characterizes George R.R. Martin's unusual new collection, *Quartet* (NESFA Press, \$25). With the exception of the book's final novella, "Blood of the Dragon," which won a Hugo Award despite being merely an extensive excerpt from the early stages of Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* fantasy sequence, all the entries here are glimpses of authorial paths not taken. Martin has had a varied, even turbulent, career, which has taken him through a succession of genres and media; *Quartet* very interestingly assembles the large textual fragments that are all that remain of projects promisingly begun but perforce aborted. That even his failed undertakings are of such quality is a remarkable tribute to Martin's dark vigorous skill; *Quartet* is as compelling as any of his finished works.

"Black and White and Red All Over" is the opening chapters of a large steampunk novel that, completed, would have captured the supernatural underside of 1890s New York as vividly as Martin's *Fevre Dream* (1982) did that of the Mississippi shores of the mid-19th century. Three journalists are investigating the distinct likelihood that Jack the Ripper has crossed the Atlantic with murderous intent; all outrageous eccentrics by the standards even of their period, they uncover bizarre enigmas, confront insane criminals and even mad scientist, begin to unriddle an



ever more riddlesome maze of clues... But his publishers weren't interested, and Martin stopped. "Skin Trade" at least reaches some closure, standing alone as a long novella about the depredations of friendly and not-so-friendly werewolves in an eerie broken-down Midwestern city; but it begs sequels, and Martin's preoccupation with TV writing and production precluded any, World Fantasy Award or no. But lest one regret those years devoted to TV, there is "Starport."

"Starport" is the teleplay for the pilot episode of a series commissioned but left unproduced by Columbia Pictures. Considering how skilfully it reproduces the chaotic copshow camaraderie of *Hill Street Blues*, and how uncannily it anticipates the successful formula of *Men in Black*, it is astonishing that this undertaking failed to gather more



impetus; only the studio bosses know why. So what is left is merely the directions and dialogue for a spectacle of hilarious exoticism, but it reads very well anyway. Chicago is the doorway to Earth for numerous alien species, some daft, some sinister, some simply other, and public order must be maintained. The human officers are frail enough; their extraterrestrial partners in law-enforcement have security protocols of their own to enact, and these are peculiar in the extreme. Slickly brilliant, "Starport"; and "Blood of the Dragon" complements it well. For the insight it lends into a major genre author's creative processes, and for its sheer intoxicating readability, *Quartet* is a fine and significant book.

If an author wishes to construct a future by ransacking the past, he can find no better teachers than Jack Vance and Gene Wolfe; and David Herter explicitly acknowledges the examples of both in his hyperkinetic but resolutely oblique debut novel, *Ceres Storm* (Tor, \$22.95). Herter's pace comes just as plainly from Alfred Bester; and so, in a novel of no great length, his protagonist restlessly ranges a Solar System grown warped and wild over long millennia of human colonization and nanotechnological ravagement. Like Wolfe's Typhon, a certain Darius once ruled the worlds as a tyrannical god-king; now, in a gesture to the circular multiplicity of clones in *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* (1972), his remnant selves, fugitives from the current regime, struggle to remember themselves, to reignite an ancient glory or escape such barren repetition. This quest is complicated over and over, as dreams infect reality, as illusions ramify and the motivations of the human factions steal into view but just as quickly out of it again. Herter is an ambitious narrative artist, then, no question; his stylistic and conceptual effects are frequently spectacular; but do they cohere, do they make a novel?

Ceres Storm is often frustrating, it has to be admitted. Determined to echo Wolfe's careful ambiguity, Vance's gift for vast implication in a throw-away line, and Bester's huge laconic energy, Herter tends to under-write, to populate his text with teasing lacunae and sudden perspectival jumps that test the reader's comprehension (which is good) but also the reader's patience (unwise in a first novel). When a rich far future is being evoked, it is not enough to insinuate, ever-sidewise, this or that mythological connection or genre illusion; apposite density of diction, mock-historical explication, and long-breathed particularity in description are necessary tools also, tried and tested. By contrast with its models, *Ceres Storm* seems short of rationale, as exiguous

of content as it is technically deft. But it should also be noted that sequels are almost certain, that this novel is probably the first instalment in a series that will grow into something

far greater and far deeper; that (to use the Wolfe analogy again) *Ceres Storm* may stand to an emerging multi-volume masterpiece much as *The Shadow of the Torturer* stood to *The*

Book of the New Sun. Perhaps it is Prologue. Perhaps, even as it looks backward for its inspiration, it anticipates new wonders.

Nick Gevers

Pat Cadigan is not a prolific writer; but what she does write is usually of the highest quality, and *Dervish is Digital* (Pan, £9.99) is no exception. Being the next adventure in the life of Doré Konstantin, cyber detective, this book follows on from (but is not a sequel to) *Tea from an Empty Cup*, where Konstantin was first introduced. Now, in reviewing Cadigan's *Avatar* from the Dolphin young adult series *The Web*, I was pleased to report that she had told a truly believable tale that involved and used virtual reality as a real part of the story. It is perfectly evident from that book and these two adult-oriented novels that she has done a lot of thinking about how virtual reality might actually work and how it might affect people out in the real world. Where Bill Gibson gave us the concept of virtual reality, Pat Cadigan offers a stunning and much more realistic take on what it might actually be like, especially where it can be used to invent new crimes that will need a new kind of cop to solve them.

In the best tradition of *noir* thrillers, the cop is world-weary and cynical, trying to do all her job herself, and relying solely on personal loyalties to get her through. Her love life is a mess, and her ex-partner, while not an active character in the story, is exactly the kind of confidence-sapping constant presence that we can all recognize within our own deep insecurities. The way Cadigan makes this all fit together is fascinating. We begin with a straightforward virtual under-

cover cop encounter that is quickly resolved, then we move on to the next case. Next case turns out to be something altogether more complex and more tenuous, and suddenly a number of different plot threads are being spun simultaneously. A third case, only slightly related to her work at all, suddenly introduces paranoid fantasies, and the reader becomes immersed in a nightmare tangle of hints and bad feeling and enemy action. That Cadigan not only manages to keep the virtual and the actual reality separate while making them both extremely vivid, but also weaves the multiple plot threads together to bring about a thoroughly satisfying but unexpected resolution, and all in only 230 pages, is a marvel to behold. From her wry wit to sudden vulnerability to her ability to be wrong and learn from the subsequent cock-ups, Doré Konstantin is a delight, and the story will repay many re-readings.

If the book has one fault, it is Cadigan's prose: it is so polished it gleams. While we wouldn't wish for a less lapidary prose style – one of the delights of reading Cadigan is her prose – we could wish that she would write more, so that we don't have to wait so long between books. But if infrequency is the price of such excellence, then we can only accept it gratefully.

The blurring of the boundaries between genres continues apace. Jon Courtenay Grimwood's first four novels were loosely-linked near-future cyberpunk alternate histories set in recognizably Western societies. His fifth, *Pashazade: The First Arabesk* (Earthlight, £12.99), while set in a similar near future, adds the delights both of being a *noirish* police procedu-

ral murder mystery and of being set in the slightly fictional future North African town of Aleskandria.

With so many different fictional elements to keep track of, it might be forgiven if the writing were no more than serviceable. It is a delight to report, therefore, that, as with Pat Cadigan above, the extraordinary depth and complexity of the plot is matched by the prose style, and one is forced to wonder whether or not the mental discipline necessary to manage plots this complex brings with it an equal facility to write it down clearly.

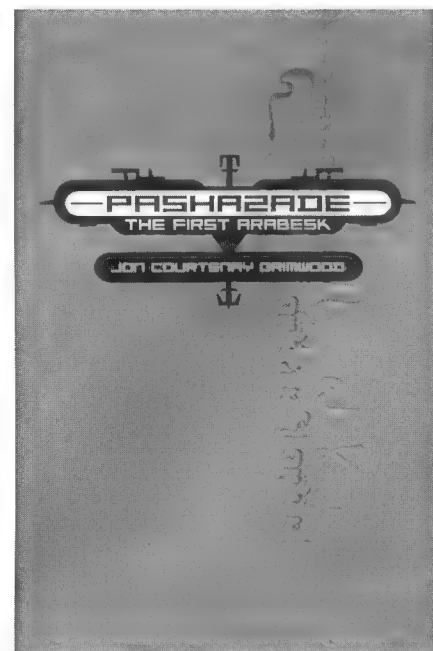
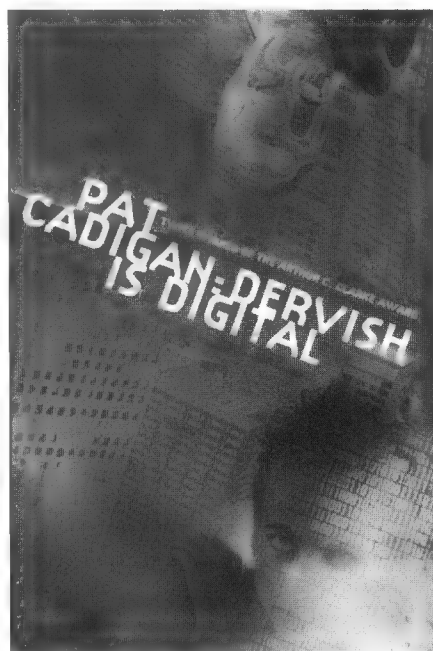
All the familiar Courtenay Grimwood trademarks are present: complex women characters of all ages from six to 60; a virtual reality aspect that is at once vital and underplayed; a believable future based on an alternative version of our past; and a central character with a very strong sense of his own mission in this world, but with readily recognizable weaknesses and failings.

Although this is the first of a series of three, it should be stressed it is a *series*. This is a complete book in itself, and the next one will be a companion, not a sequel. As such, it cannot be recommended highly enough. If you only read two books this year, they should be this one and the Cadigan.

It has been a pure delight to have two such wonderful *science fiction* novels to read, although I don't object to reading fantasy, especially when it's by favourite authors. But my heart belongs in the technical world, so it is

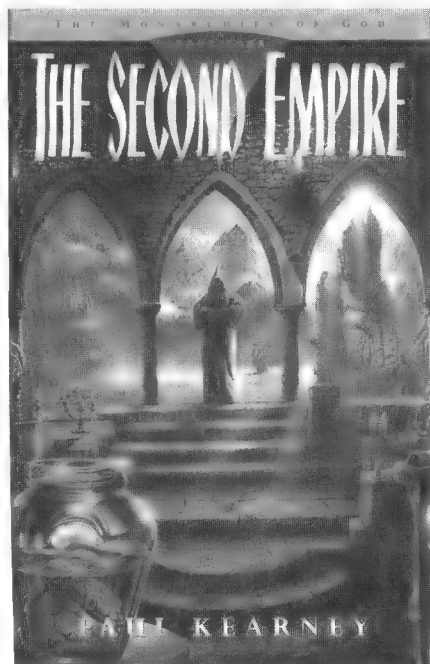
Serious Series

Paul Brazier



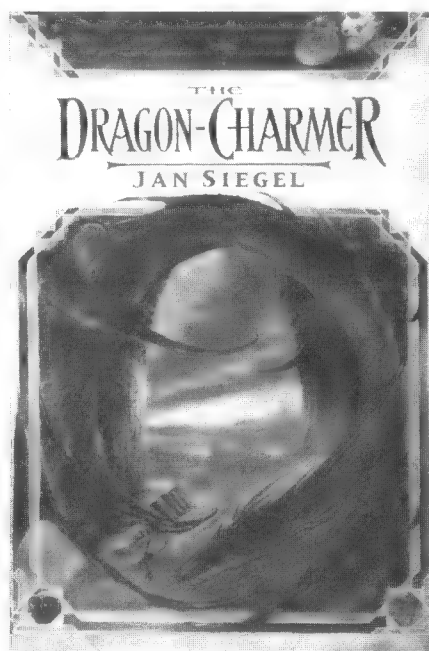
all the more gratifying to present a book that in some ways straddles the two genres. **The Second Empire** (Gollancz, £16.99, HC, £5.99 PB) is the fourth in Paul

Kearney's *Monarchies of God* series. It must be very difficult for a writer, when embarking on a series like this, to conceive of making each novel a story in its own right and also a coherent part of the overall story. And yet Paul Kearney manages this with consummate ease. Certainly, it would appear that this series started out as a fantastic retelling of the European middle ages, and it would be quite expected for the fourth part of such a series to sag a bit, to slip towards inconsequentiality. Instead, there is a glorious conclusion to a plot thread so major that in others it might have constituted the whole story. Instead, Kearney has woven in enough other threads – there is a werewolf, and an ancient wizard, and a king with bed-posts for legs, whose stories also need to be concluded – that at least one, and possibly two, more books can confidently be expected. With keen anticipation.



Another fantasy, and this time with no pretence of scientific rigour, is nevertheless a delight. Jan Siegel's follow-up to *Prospero's Children* is **The Dragon Charmer** (Voyager, £16.99). Siegel reveals in a forthcoming interview in this magazine that there is a sequence of four or five of these books planned, but they are each individual novels. Certainly this one is very different from the first.

Prospero's Children was a slightly misleading first novel, in that as it dealt with a girl's first discovery of the



ability to do magic and her subsequent encounters with some of the darker forces, it appeared to be aimed at young adults, albeit at the more demanding end of the scale. But any idea that these books are for young adults or children is scotched by this new book.

As a result of the trauma of her adventures, the girl, Fern, has put away all thought or idea of supernatural powers, has grown up in London, and is now returning to get married from the house in Yorkshire where her youthful adventure took place. But she unwittingly challenges the older forces, and as a consequence spends a large part of the book in a coma. The narrative follows both her inner struggle to escape the entrapment she has suffered and the external struggle of her brother and friend along with her old allies to try to bring her back.

I have to say that I found the early part of this book very dark and quite *hard going*, but that once the two parallel stories got properly set up the book became much more of a pleasure to read. As with the first book, this one is a complete novel in its own right, and Siegel is to be congratulated on adhering to this idea. There is too much endless serial fiction nowadays (otherwise known as soap opera) and attempts to give us properly resolved stories such as this cannot be praised highly enough, especially when they are so well achieved.

From the new to the classic, and back to great science fiction: more than 60 years ago, in 1937, Eric Frank Russell sold his first short story to *Astounding*; but the earliest story included in the new collection **Major Ingredients: The Selected Short Stories of Eric Frank Russell** (Nesfa

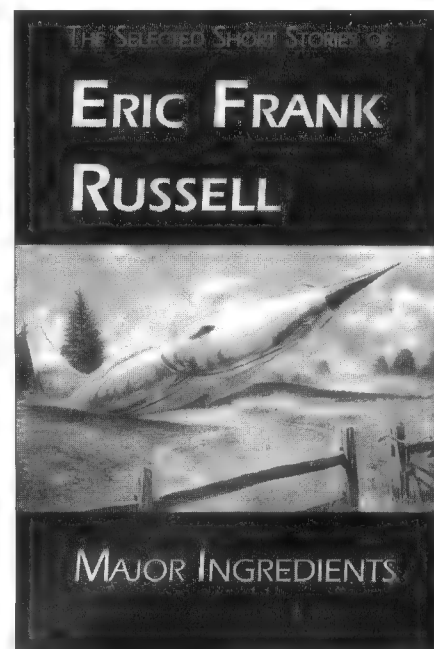
Press, \$29) ed. Rick Katze, is "Jay Score," from *Astounding* in May 1941. The most recent is from *If Worlds of Science Fiction*. "Meeting on Kangshan" appeared in March 1965. It is astonishing to think that someone who sold so consistently for nearly thirty years is today almost forgotten, and heartening that this big book has been put together to redress that balance.

But Eric Frank Russell is deeply out of sympathy with modern writing. Don't go to this book looking for sensitive character portraits from yesteryear, because there are none. A typical Russell story will have a single scout from Earth land on a planet to find out if it is worth colonizing. The problems the scout encounters, and the solution to them, are the sole *raison d'être* for the story, and the character of the scout is always the same, for he is far from home, far from help, and lives or dies by his wits.

Having said that, there is much that is affecting and not merely intellectually stimulating here. Favourite of these is "Dear Devil," the story of an alien who comes to a devastated Earth and triggers the resurgence of mankind by simple kind intervention on a personal level, and what appears in some ways to be Russell's swan song, the aforementioned "Meeting On Kangshan."

To be sure, these stories have not worn very well; the attitudes are rather out of date, and some of the intellectual puzzles might seem a trifle lame nowadays. Nevertheless, Russell was high in the second rank of sf authors in the middle of this century, and anyone who has wanted an overview of his work will be well served by this excellent collection.

Paul Brazier



This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anderson, Kevin J. **Dogged Persistence.** Introduction by Kristine Kathryn Rusch. Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, USA], ISBN 1-930846-03-7, xiv+303pp, hardcover, cover by Dave Dorman, \$25.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; signed by the author [all 4,000 copies of the print run]; under its rather truculent title, it gathers 18 stories first published in magazines or anthologies between 1985 and 2000; it's the first "book-length short-story collection" by Kevin Anderson [born 1962], although he has published many novels, including a number of bestselling *Star Wars* and *Dune* tie-ins; a *Dune* short story, co-authored with Brian Herbert, is included here.) *June 2001.*

Ashley, Mike, ed. **The Mammoth Book of Awesome Comic Fantasy.** Robinson, ISBN 1-84119-080-2, xii+528pp, B-format paperback, cover by Julek Heller, £6.99. (Humorous fantasy anthology, first edition; a follow-up to *The Mammoth Book of Comic Fantasy* [1998] and *The Mammoth Book of Seriously Comic Fantasy* [1999], it contains reprint stories by Jack Adrian, F. Anstey, Anthony Armstrong,

Nelson Bond, Fredric Brown, John Cleese & Connie Booth, Michael G. Coney, Avram Davidson, Craig Shaw Gardner, Ron Goulart, Garry Kilworth, David Langford, John Morressy, Jack Sharkey, Israel Zangwill and others, together with original stories by Cherith Baldry, James Bibby, Paul Di Filippo, Scott Edelman, Esther Friesner, John Grant, Tom Holt, Stan Nicholls, Marilyn Todd and others; as usual, Ashley has included some entertaining oddities here; recommended.) *1st June 2001.*

Bisson, Terry. **In the Upper Room and Other Likely Stories.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87420-0, 284pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 2000; 16 funny, ingenious tales by a writer who has been described as "in the tradition of Vonnegut and Twain"; most first appeared in *Playboy*, *Omni*, *F&SF* and *Asimov's*; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 159.) *13th June 2001.*

Blish, James. **The Seedling Stars.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07239-3, 185pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1957; although loosely describable as a "novel," it's actually a collection of four linked stories – "Seeding Program," "The Thing in the Attic," "Surface Tension" and "Watershed"; some of Blish's best.) *17th May 2001.*

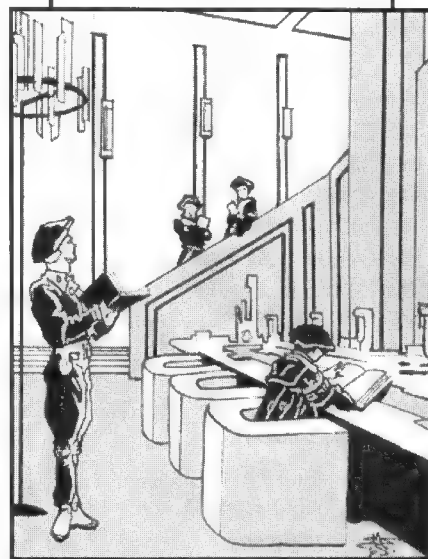
Brust, Steven. **Issola.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85927-9, 255pp, hardcover, cover by Stephen Hickman, \$22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a new entry in Brust's occasional "Vlad Taltos" series of fantastic swashbucklers, following such earlier titles as *Athyra*, *Orca* and *Dragon* [1998].) *July 2001.*

Carey, Jacqueline. **Kushiel's Dart.** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-87238-0, 701pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; another bonecrusher of a Big Commercial Fantasy by a new American writer, it's described as a "sensual tale of Machiavellian intrigue and corruption, pagan splendor, high opulence..."; Storm Constantine and Delia Sherman commend it.) *June 2001.*

Carroll, Jonathan. **The Wooden Sea.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07060-9, 247pp, hardcover, cover by Joe del Tufo, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; reviewed, from the American edition, by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 166.) *17th May 2001.*

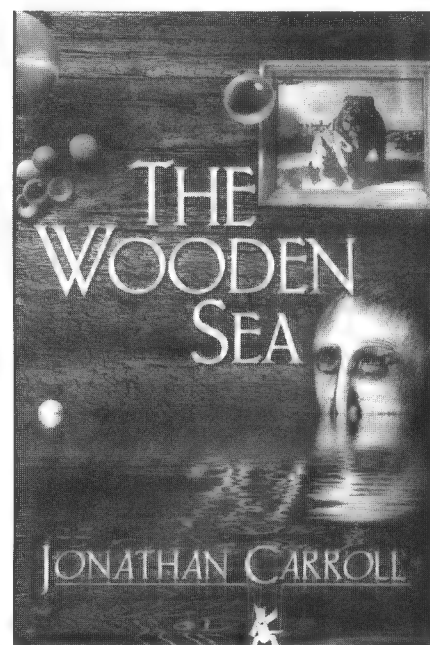
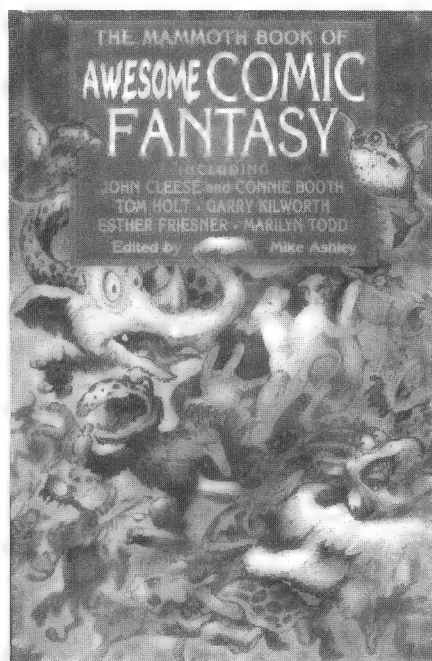
Chamberlin, Ann. **The Merlin of the Oak Wood: Book Two of the Joan of**

BOOKS RECEIVED



MAY
2001

Arc Tapestries. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87284-4, 335pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; set in 14th-century France, it's a follow-up to *The Merlin of St Gilles' Well* [1999], which passed us by; the author appears to be primarily an historical novelist who has turned to fantasy recently; in her brief afterword she states, "Margaret A. Murray's books *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* and *The God of the Witches* were the immediate inspiration... I am perfectly aware that no respectable scholar since the 1970s has taken her



thesis seriously, but this didn't stop me from setting off on my quest.") July 2001.

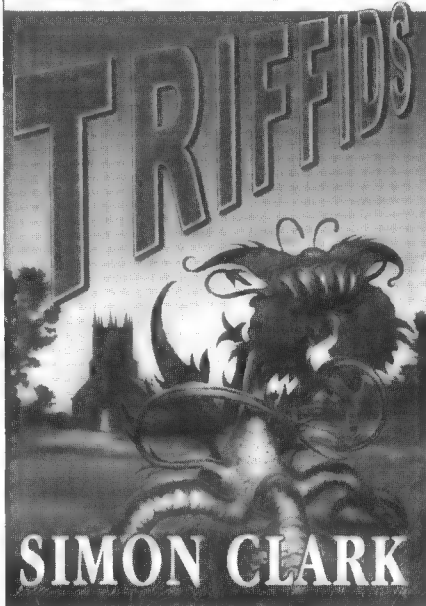
Clark, Simon. **The Night of the Triffids**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-76600-X, ix+406pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £17.99. (Sf/horror novel, first edition; an authorized sequel by another hand to John Wyndham's best-seller of exactly 50 years ago, *The Day of the Triffids* [1951]; originally announced for 2000 but delayed [perhaps appropriately] into the half-centenary year of 2001, it's copyright "Simon Clark and The John Wyndham Estate Trust.") 7th June 2001.

Clarke, Arthur C. **The Space Trilogy**. Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-780-2, xii+506pp, B-format paperback, cover by John Harris, £7.99. (Sf omnibus, first edition; it contains the novels *Islands in the Sky* (1954), *The Sands of Mars* (1951) and *Earthlight* [1955] – three of the author's early minor works, and not a trilogy in any meaningful sense [still, it's good to have them together here]; there is also a new foreword by the Clarke, dated January 2001; one quibble: *Islands in the Sky* is a "juvenile," while the other two are adult novels – wouldn't it have been better to substitute Clarke's long-out-of-print debut novel *Prelude to Space* [1951, but written in 1947]?) 31st May 2001.

Dozois, Gardner, and Sheila Williams, eds. **Isaac Asimov's Father's Day**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00874-7, 243pp, A-format paperback, cover by Hiro Kimura, \$5.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; nine stories on, uh, "paternal" themes, all reprinted from Asimov's *SF Magazine*, 1990-1998; authors include Thomas M. Disch, James Patrick Kelly, Jonathan Lethem, Robert Reed, Pamela Sargent and Harry Turtledove; "Papa" by Ian R. MacLeod is the lead story – see the interview with him, and the accompanying bibliography, in this issue of *Interzone*.) May 2001.

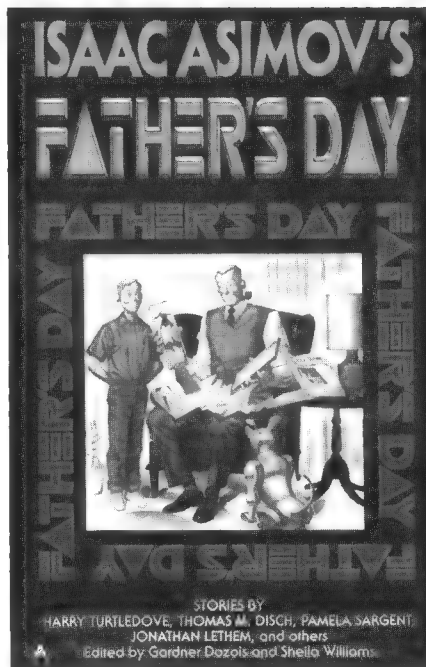
Drake, Emily. **The Magickers**. DAW, ISBN 0-88677-935-9, viii+344pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Youll, \$19.95. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; this looks as though it may be an attempt to cash in on the Harry Potter boom; "Emily Drake" is a new pseudonym of Rhondi Vilott Salsitz, who has written copiously under various names [including sf novels as "Charles Ingrid"], mainly for DAW Books.) June 2001.

THE NIGHT OF THE



Feist, Raymond E. **Krondor: Tear of the Gods**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224684-8, vi+372pp, C-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £10.99. (Fantasy computer-game novelization, first published in 2000; based, like its predecessors, on the game *Return to Krondor* [produced by Pyrotechnix, Inc.], it's Book III of "The Riftwar Legacy" – although that's not stated on the title page or cover.) 4th June 2001.

Furey, Maggie. **Spirit of the Stone: Book Two of The Shadowleague**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-952-0, 426pp, hardcover, cover by Mick Van Houten, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the second in a Big Commercial Fantasy trilogy of the



kind that this English-born, Irish-resident author specializes in.) 21st June 2001.

Fury, David. **Kings of the Jungle: An Illustrated Reference to "Tarzan" on Screen and Television**. "McFarland Classics." Foreword by Maureen O'Sullivan. McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1109-0, xiii+256pp, trade paperback, \$25. (Illustrated fantasy filmography, first published in the USA, 1994; sterling-priced import copies should be available in the UK from Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; it gives detailed annotated listings of all the Tarzan films and TV series inspired by the writings of Edgar Rice Burroughs – up to the early 1990s: unfortunately, no attempt has been made to update the book for this paperback reissue; recommended, within its limits.) July 2001.

Gray, Julia. **The Jasper Forest: Book Two of The Guardian Cycle**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-057-1, 567pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "Julia Gray" is believed to be a pseudonym of Mark and Julia Smith, who previously wrote as "Jonathan Wylie.") 7th June 2001.

Harlan, Thomas. **The Storm of Heaven: Book Three of The Oath of Empire**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86559-7, 558pp, hardcover, cover by Stephen Hickman, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *The Shadow of Ararat* [1999] and *The Gate of Fire* [2000]; although Big Commercial Fantasy, with magic, it's set in a quasi-science-fictional alternative timeline where Rome did not fall; the author is a former games-designer.) 28th June 2001.

Hogan, Walter. **The Agony and the Eggplant: Daniel Pinkwater's Heroic Struggles in the Name of YA Literature**. "Scarecrow Studies in Young Adult Literature, No. 5." Scarecrow Press, ISBN 0-8108-3994-6, xii+159pp, hardcover, £25.60. (Critical study of the juvenile fantasy stories of writer, illustrator and broadcaster Daniel Manus Pinkwater [born 1941]; first published in the USA, 2001; this is the American first edition with a sterling price indicated, available in the UK from Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; Pinkwater is perhaps not an author well known in Britain, but is regarded very highly indeed in his native USA.) 21st June 2001.

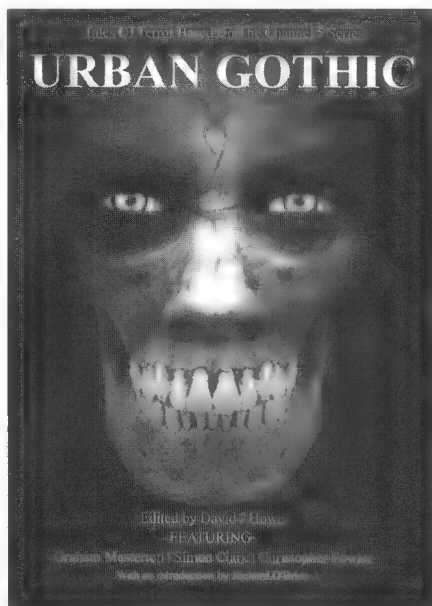
Howe, David J., ed. **Urban Gothic: Lacuna and Other Trips.** Introduction by Richard O'Brien. "Tales of Terror Based on the Channel 5 Series." Telos Publishing [61 Elgar Ave., Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9JP], ISBN 1-903889-00-6, 252pp, trade paperback, cover by Nathan Skreslet, £9.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; a limited edition of 300 numbered copies signed by all the contributors; there is a simultaneous 100-copy hardcover edition priced at £30 [not seen]; it contains six original London terror tales spun off from a recent TV series, by Simon Clark, Christopher Fowler, Steve Lockley & Paul Lewis, Graham Masterton and others; see website: www.telos.co.uk.) July 2001.

Hoyle, Fred, and John Elliot. **A for Andromeda.** "The Story-Tellers." Souvenir Press, ISBN 0-285-63588-3, 174pp, B-format paperback, cover by Scott Prentice and Angela Hynde, £7.99. (Sf TV-serial novelization, first published in the UK, 1962; it comes as a bit of a surprise to see this one reissued after all this time: based on the 1961 BBC TV serial of the same title, scripted by the same authors, it dates from the dim and distant days when UK radio-and-TV sf spinoffery seemed to consist of fewer than a dozen volumes – Charles Chilton's *Journey Into Space* novels [Pan Books], Nigel Kneale's *Quatermass* scripts [Penguin Books] and just a few other oddments; in that company, in those days, this imaginative science thriller by leading astronomer Hoyle and professional TV writer Elliot stood up well; it will probably read as quaintly old-fashioned nowadays, though.) 24th May 2001.

Kearney, Paul. **The Second Empire: Book Four of The Monarchies of God.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-751-9, x+294pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000.) 10th May 2001.

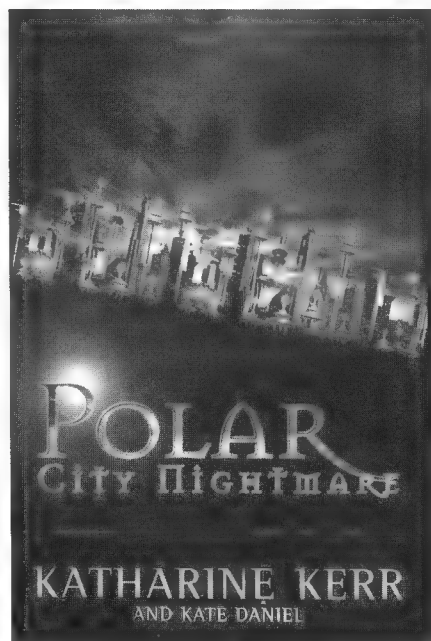
Kerr, Katharine, and Kate Daniel. **Polar City Nightmare.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-783-7, 357pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; an "Author's Note" from senior partner Kerr denies that the book is a sharecrop: "this is an old-fashioned collaboration; Kate Daniel and I shared the writing and the planning both.") 10th May 2001.

Kress, Nancy. **Probability Sun.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87407-3, 348pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy



received; a follow-up to *Probability Moon* [2000]; Nancy Kress is now married to British-born hard-sf writer Charles Sheffield, to whom this novel is dedicated [[he also helped with the science].) July 2001.

Langford, David. **The Leaky Establishment.** Introduction by Terry Pratchett. Big Engine [PO Box 185, Abingdon, Oxon. OX14 1GR], ISBN 1-903468-00-0, 209pp, trade paperback, cover by Deirdre Counihan, £7.99. (Humorous mainstream novel about nuclear research, by a well-known sf personality; first published in the UK, 1984; this is the first book from the welcome new "print-on-demand" publishing house established by Ben Jeapes [see the interview with him in



Interzone 160]; reviewed by Mary Gentle in *IZ* 11; reviewed again by Chris Gilmore in the present issue; for ordering information, see website: www.bigengine.co.uk.) Announced as a January publication, but received by us in May 2001.

Lindholm, Megan. **The Reindeer People.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711422-2, 332pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £5.99. (Prehistoric fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988; "part one of a two-book sequence" [to be followed by a reprint of its sequel, *Wolf's Brother*], this novel was first issued in the UK by Unwin Hyman in 1989; this time around, the publishers are careful to add to the cover byline: "Megan Lindholm... WHO ALSO WRITES AS ROBIN HOBB.") 21st May 2001.

Luceno, James. **Cloak of Deception.** "Star Wars." Century/Lucas Books, ISBN 0-7126-7957-X, 342pp, hardcover, cover by Steven D. Anderson, £15.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2001.) 15th June 2001.

Lumley, Brian. **Necroscope: Avengers.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87923-7, 445pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$25.95. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 2001; the follow-up to *Necroscope: Invaders* [1999] and *Necroscope: Defilers* [2000] in this ever-extending pulp-style adventure-horror series.) 20th June 2001.

McAuley, Paul. **The Secret of Life.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30080-X, 413pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2001; proof copy received; reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 166; Greg Bear, Gregory Benford and Nancy Kress commend this US edition of McAuley's latest.) June 2001.

McDevitt, Jack. **Deepsix.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-710879-6, 432pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2001; a new hard-sf, outer-space-set, "spellbinding novel of discovery, catastrophe and survival" from the increasingly-popular Mr McDevitt.) 4th June 2001.

MacLeod, Ken. **Cosmonaut Keep.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30032-X, 300pp, hardcover, cover by Stephan Martiniere, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2000; the first in a proposed series, although the US publishers downplay that fact; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 166.) 30th May 2001.

Martin, George R. R. **A Storm of Swords, One: Steel and Snow.** Book



Three of A Song of Ice and Fire.

Voyager, ISBN 0-00-647990-1, 661pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 2000; the third volume of Martin's ongoing epic was so vast that the publishers have seen fit to split it in two for mass-market paperback reissue – and this is the first of those two parts; the full thing was reviewed, with high praise, by Nick Gevers in *Interzone* 164.) 4th June 2001.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Magi'i of Cyador.**

Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-027-X, xii+544pp, A-format paperback, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; the tenth "Saga of Recluce" novel; Modesitt has a reputation for being at the hard-edged, scientifically-minded end of the Big Commercial Fantasy field.) 7th June 2001.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **The Shadow Sorceress: Book Four of The Spellsong Cycle.**

Tor, ISBN 0-312-87877-X, 510pp, hardcover, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it "continues the story begun in the first Spellsong trilogy," set in a world "where music is the vehicle for the creation and wielding of magic.") 20th June 2001.

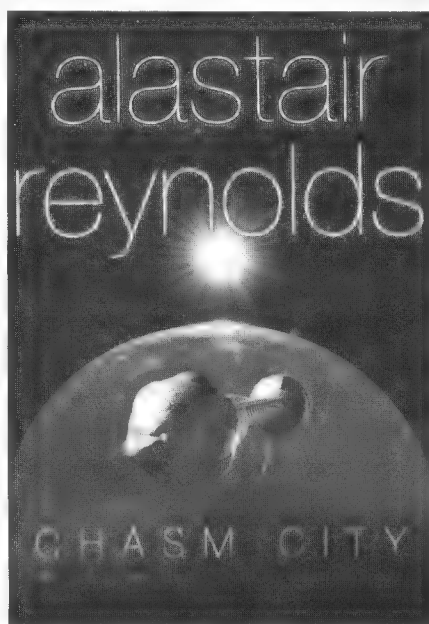
Moorcock, Michael. **Elric.** "Fantasy Masterworks, 17." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-743-8, 416pp, B-format paperback, cover by Michael Whelan, £6.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition in this form; the adventures of the sword-swinging albino prince Elric repackaged for the umpteenth time; this volume consists, essentially [the actual bibliographical history is complex], of two of Moorcock's earliest books – the collection *The Stealer of Souls* [1963] and the novel *Stormbringer* [1965]; it seems to contain the 1977 revised texts; all the stories that made up those two books first appeared in *Science Fantasy*, 1961-1964.) 10th May 2001.

Parker, K. J. **Shadow: The Scavenger Trilogy, Book One.**

Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-019-9, 572pp, C-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; according to the publishers, "the first book in a series that takes fantasy fiction into remarkable new territory.") 7th June 2001.

Pohl, Frederik. **Jem.**

"SF Masterworks, 41." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-789-6, 300pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1979; about the colonizing of an alien planet; some past



editions have carried the ironic sub-title "The Making of a Utopia," but that's not in evidence here.) 10th May 2001.

Pratchett, Terry. **The Rincewind Trilogy.**

Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07236-9, 568pp, hardcover, cover by Josh Kirby, £16.99. (Humorous fantasy omnibus, first edition; it contains two novels, *Sourcery* [1988] and *Interesting Times* [1994], and a novella, *Eric* [1990], all in the celebrated "Discworld" series.) 17th May 2001.

Reynolds, Alastair. **Chasm City.**

Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06877-9, 524pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £17.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; Reynolds's second novel, and another blockbuster; follow-up to his well-



received *Revelation Space* [2000].) 17th May 2001.

Reynolds, Alastair. **Revelation Space.**

Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-748-9, 545pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2000; the author's debut novel, short-listed for the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 2001; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 154.) 10th May 2001.

Reynolds, Alastair. **Revelation Space.**

Ace, ISBN 0-441-00835-6, 476pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2000; this is the first American edition – similar to, but more attractive than, the first UK edition, in that it's in a handier, smaller format [why are so many British publishers addicted to oversize books?].) June 2001.

Russo, Joe, and Larry Landsman, with Edward Gross. **Planet of the Apes Revisited.**

Foreword by Charlton Heston. St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-25239-0, xxi+275pp, trade paperback, \$19.95. (Illustrated companion to the "Apes" series of sf movies and its spinoff TV series; first edition; proof copy received; timed to tie in with the new *Planet of the Apes* film directed by Tim Burton, it's blurred as "the 'behind-the-scenes' story of the classic science-fiction saga" – the whole of which is based, fairly remotely, on a satirical sf novel of the 1960s by the French author Pierre Boulle.) July 2001.

Shetterly, Will. **Chimera.**

Tor, ISBN 0-312-87543-6, 285pp, trade paperback, cover by Michael Koelsch, \$14.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; a "tale of gene-splicing and artificial intelligence" by an author hitherto best-known for his fantasy novels.) 13th June 2001.

Stevenson, Laura C. **All the King's Horses.**

Illustrated by David Wyatt. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-54718-2, 319pp, B-format paperback, cover by Sue Clarke, £4.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; "a wonderfully lyrical and moving fantasy adventure," according to the publishers.) 7th June 2001.

Tiptree, James, Jr. **Meet Me at Infinity.**

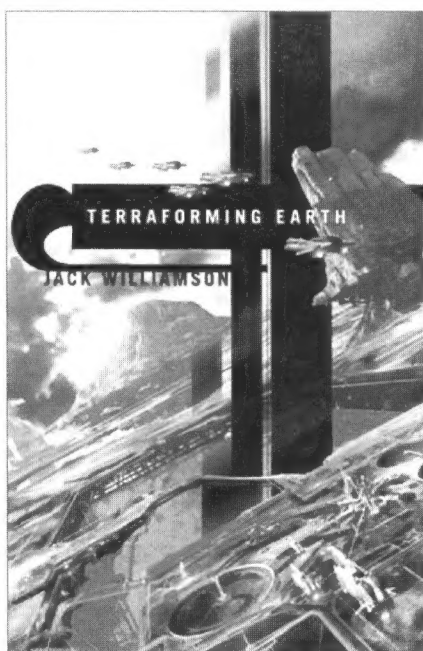
Edited by Jeffrey D. Smith. "The Uncollected Tiptree: Fiction and Nonfiction." Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-86938-X, 396pp, trade paperback, cover by John Harris, \$15.95. (Sf/mainstream/non-fiction collection, first published in the USA, 2000; "James Tiptree, Jr" was, of course, the sf-

writing pseudonym of Alice Bradley Sheldon [1915-1987]; this book brings together all her uncollected writings – stories, early and late, non-fiction snippets, interviews, etc; among the interesting items included is her very first published story, “The Lucky Ones,” about refugees in post-war Germany [*The New Yorker*, 16th November 1946, under the byline Alice Bradley]; a significant volume; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 158.) 13th June 2001.

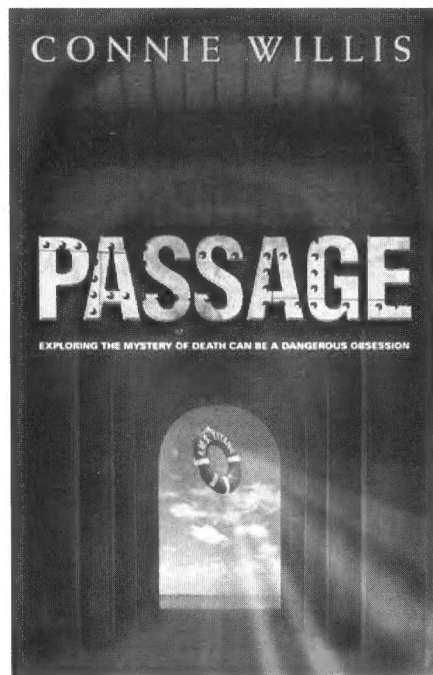
Turteltaub, H. N. **Over the Wine-Dark Sea.** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-87660-2, 383pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Historical novel, first edition; proof copy received; no prizes for guessing who this tale of “high adventure on the seas of the Hellenistic world” is by: it seems the historically well-informed but over-prolific Harry Turtledove, not content with churning out an average of two whopping alternate-world sf or fantasy novels per annum, is branching into a “straighter” kind of historical fiction here.) July 2001.

Wells, H. G. **The Sea Lady: A Tissue of Moonshine: A Critical Text of the 1902 London First Edition, with an Introduction and Appendices.** Edited by Leon Stover. “The Annotated H. G. Wells, 7.” McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0996-7, xi+170pp, hardcover, \$49.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1902; first edition in this form – i.e. heavily annotated by Professor Stover; it contains notes and various appendices, plus a bibliography; to the best of our knowledge this is the first annotated version of this minor and often overlooked mermaid fantasy by Wells, and as such it is welcome [however, that has to be subject to the same reservations as expressed for the following item, the annotated *War of the Worlds*]; *The Sea Lady* was first serialized in *Pearson's Magazine* [UK], Jul.-Dec. 1901.) July 2001.

Wells, H. G. **The War of the Worlds: A Critical Text of the 1898 London First Edition, with an Introduction, Illustrations and Appendices.** Edited by Leon Stover. “The Annotated H. G. Wells, 4.” McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0780-8, xi+321pp, hardcover, \$55. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1898; first edition in this form; the other Stover-edited volumes of Wells's novels in this series include *The Time Machine* [1996], *The Island of Dr Moreau* [1996], *The Invisible Man* [1998], *The First Men in the Moon* [1998] and *When the Sleeper Wakes* [2000], plus the above item, *The Sea Lady*,



which appears simultaneously with this one; on the face of it, Stover seems to have done another thorough job here, adding copious notes, some of which fill half of the text pages, and multiple appendices plus a bibliography; however, as one reads through Stover's introduction and annotations, one soon comes to realize that he has an eccentric political thesis to promote – in short, that Wells was a kind of proto-fascist “Statist,” uninterested in democratic values or the welfare of the common man; this is a view of Wells, produced by selective quotation and distortion of the evidence, that is vehemently opposed by most well-informed



Wells scholars; *The War of the Worlds*, still one of the greatest sf novels ever, was first serialized in *Pearson's Magazine* [UK], April-December 1897, and *The Cosmopolitan* [USA], May-December 1897.) July 2001.

White, James. **Beginning Operations.** “A Sector General Omnibus.” Introduction by Brian Stableford. Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-87544-4, 511pp, trade paperback, cover by John Harris, \$19.95. (Sf omnibus, first edition; it gathers together the first three fix-up novels in the late James White's well-liked series about a giant hospital in outer space – *Hospital Station* [1962], *Star Surgeon* [1963] and *Major Operation* [1971]; it's good to see that this British writer, largely forgotten in the UK, is still so honoured in America.) 6th June 2001.

Wilkins, Kim. **The Resurrectionists.** Orion, ISBN 1-85798-793-4, 503pp, A-format paperback, cover by Caspar David Friedrich, £6.99. (Horror novel, first published in Australia [?], 2000; Wilkins's third novel, featuring a modern-day Aussie heroine in an England redolent of 18th-century “grave robbing and diabolical science.”) 31st May 2001.

Williamson, Jack. **Terraforming Earth.** Tor, no ISBN shown, 348pp, hardcover, no price shown. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a brand new novel, about “the fate of the Earth after a catastrophic impact by a huge meteor,” from the inventor of the word “terraforming” [he coined it in an *Astounding* serial in 1942]; who would have thought that a writer who published his first story in 1928 would still be producing new fiction in the 21st century? – astonishing!) June 2001.

Willis, Connie. **Passage.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711825-2, 594pp, C-format paperback, £11.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2001; it concerns research into near-death experiences, and seems to be slanted towards the mainstream; judging by the almost embarrassing number of Hugos and Nebulas and other such awards she has won, Willis is probably the most honoured sf writer in America [among sf fans, at any rate]; but she remains somewhat obscure in the UK; HarperCollins/Voyager may be trying to “break her out” with this big book, her first novel to be published here in nearly a decade.) 18th June 2001.

THEY CAME FROM OUTER SPACE!

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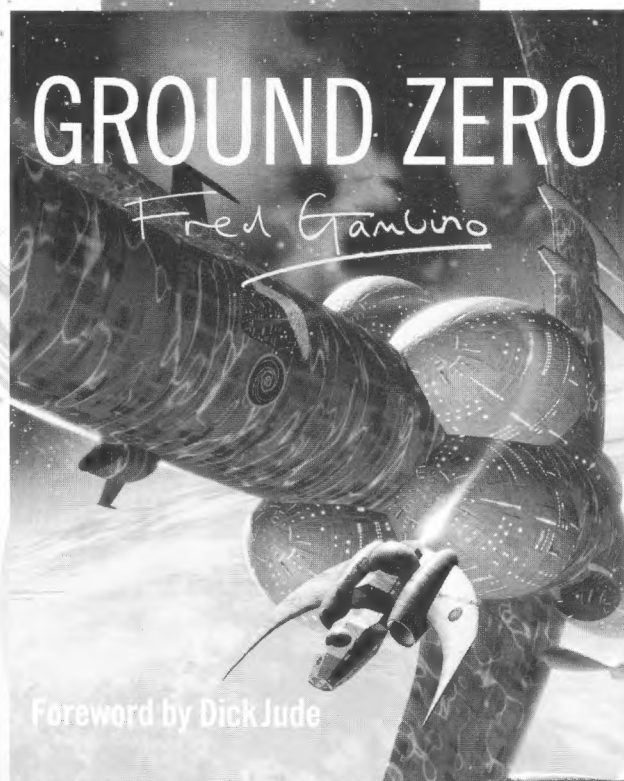


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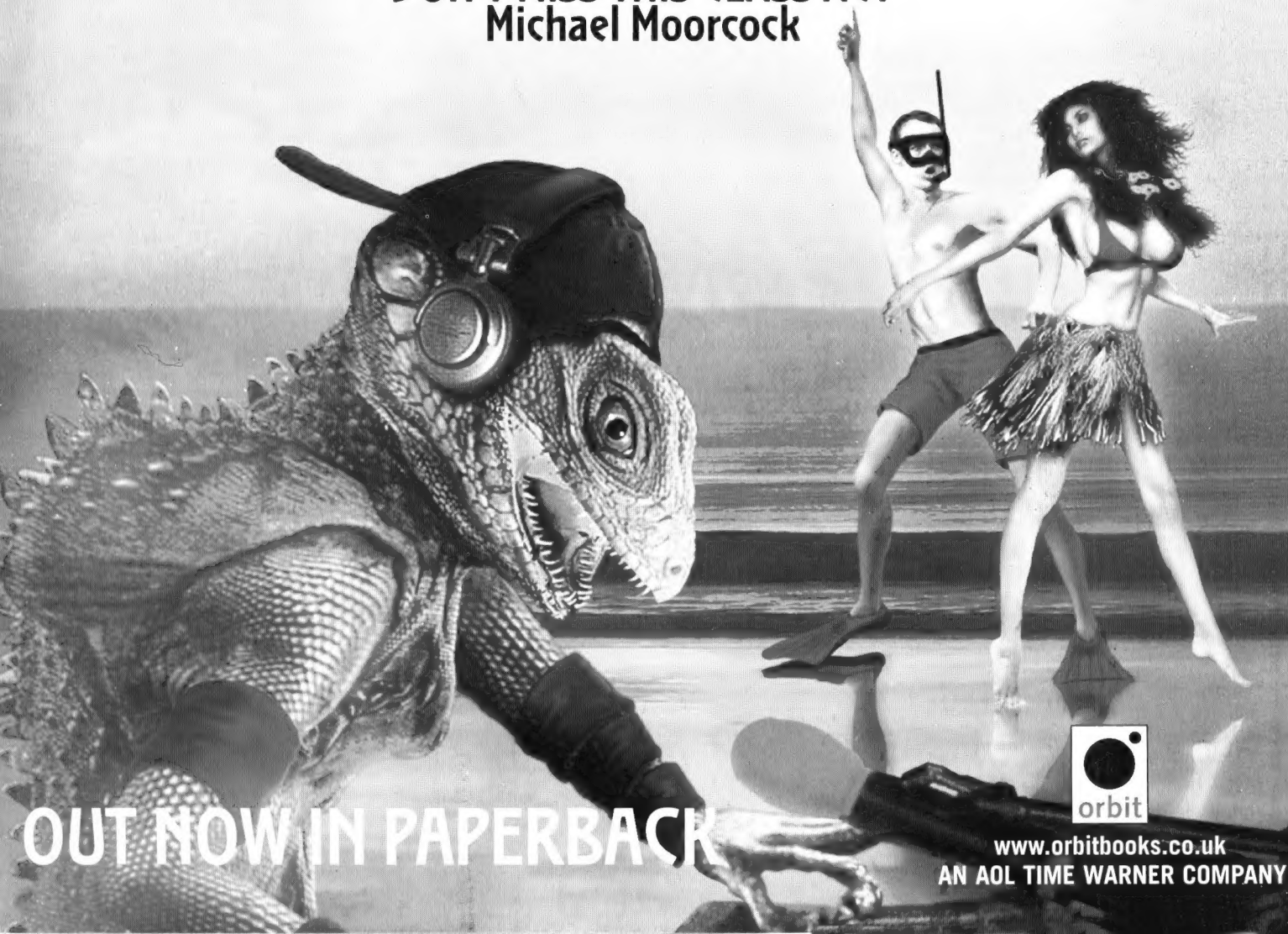
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